

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE CASE OF THE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS





in

**THE CASE
OF THE
STRANGE BEDFELLOWS**

In the middle of the night, a mysterious briefcase is thrown over the fence into the salvage yard by an unknown person. Jupiter, Pete and Bob can hardly believe their eyes when they discover what it contains. Who is the briefcase for? The Three Investigators take on the investigation. When a fire breaks out at the salvage yard, they realize that they are in great danger. Under strange circumstances, they have to work with one of their greatest foes. Will that work out? Only time will tell...

The Three Investigators
in
The Case of the Strange Bedfellows

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Der finstere Rivale

(The Three ???: The Sinister Rival)

by

André Marx

(2004)

Cover art by

Silvia Christoph

(2021-01-18)

Contents

- 1. A Flying Briefcase**
- 2. Fire!**
- 3. After Him!**
- 4. An Old Acquaintance**
- 5. Control is Better**
- 6. Furious**
- 7. The Pact**
- 8. Operation Money Case**
- 9. Jupiter is Stuck**
- 10. In a Tight Spot**
- 11. A Child's Handwriting**
- 12. A Devious Attempt**
- 13. No Signal**
- 14. Calhoon's Workshop**
- 15. The Wild Goose Chase**
- 16. Into the Tunnel!**
- 17. Strange Bedfellows**
- 18. In the Nick of Time**

1. A Flying Briefcase

Pete saw the oncoming truck almost too late. Huge and black, suddenly it appeared behind a bend and started honking wildly. Pete frantically turned the steering wheel around and scraped past the truck by a hair's breadth.

"Maybe you should stay on your track," advised Jupiter, who was sitting next to him.

"But then it's no fun!" Pete laughed, accelerated and took the next turn at 100 km/h. He drifted onto the oncoming lane and beyond, splattering gravel and sand crashing against the bodywork. "Ingenious!"

Again a car came towards them.

"Watch out," cried Jupiter, as Pete made no move to swerve.

"Geez, do you think I'm blind?" Pete calmly replied—and at the last second pulled to the left, which finally landed him on the gravel road. When the oncoming traffic had passed, he turned right again.

"Enough of these games," Jupiter said.

He laughed heartily. "Now I'm gonna hit it!" He accelerated to 110 km/h.

120 km/h...

130 km/h...

140 km/h, and left and right the dry desert landscape flew past them. The air flickered over the hot asphalt, distorting oncoming vehicles into colourful spots that seemed to float above the road.

A red car appeared in front of them. It chugged across the road with a maximum of 100 km/h. Much too slow. Pete set out to overtake.

"There's a curve," Jupiter said. "Do you think you can make it?"

"What kind of question is that? I'm the master of the desert road, remember?"

"I'm just saying, you know, in case somebody meets you halfway."

"Then I've had bad luck." Pete barely slowed down and shot past the red car in the middle of the left turn.

Then came a black Mercedes. It raced towards them on the opposite lane. This time Pete had no chance. On the right was the car he overtook, ahead was the Mercedes, and to the left he couldn't swerve because of the sharp curve.

"Aaaaaaahhh!" Pete yelled and squeezed his eyes closed.

He collided head-on with the Mercedes, his car took off, flew over the road in a high arc, spun once around its own axis and landed crashing into the desert dust, where it overturned two or three times and finally came to rest as a complete wreck.

A red 'Game Over' message flashed on the screen, and Pete let himself fall back in his chair.

"After all. None of us have ever got this far on this level before." Satisfied, he registered that his name had moved to the top of the high score list.

"Now it's my turn!" Jupiter urged, and more or less pushed Pete from the chair.

"Ha! Not a chance, Juve! The king of the desert road is unbeatable!"

"We'll see about that!" Jupiter pressed the 'Start' button and a new game began.

Jupiter and Pete had now been sitting in front of their computer for hours in the old mobile home trailer that served as The Three Investigators' headquarters. Half-empty chip bags and Coke bottles were scattered around them, but that was hardly noticeable in the constant chaos that prevailed in the trailer. Pete's eyes were already red-rimmed, but he just had to watch the otherwise almost infallible First Investigator, Jupiter Jones, lose at the car race.

Suddenly the door swung open and Bob Andrews, the third member of the detective group, entered Headquarters. Jupiter was distracted for a split second and had his first crash before he had even accelerated properly.

"Hi guys, what's going on here?" Bob asked.

"Gambling den," Pete said. "Jupe is a complete failure."

"Not true," the First Investigator growled and drove on doggedly.

"I want to have a go," Bob announced.

"Sure," Pete said and grinned. "Won't be long now. I'm sure Jupe will be done soon."

"Joker," replied Jupiter—and he crashed down a bridge with his car.

"Before I forget, Jupe," Bob began, pretending not to notice the crash, "there's an old brown briefcase by the road, right next to Red Gate Rover. It's half hidden in the bushes. I almost tripped over it when I squeezed through the gate. Does this thing belong to you? I thought maybe your Uncle Titus put it there and forgot about it."

"Not that I know of. Is there anything in it?"

"I don't know, I didn't open it."

"If it's still there tomorrow morning, I'll ask Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter muttered absently and clawed his fingers into the joystick. He gritted his teeth when he missed an oncoming vehicle by a hair's breadth. He drifted off the road, skidded in the desert sand and crashed into a boulder.

Game over... and he was still a long way from Pete's record.

The Second Investigator laughed gloatingly. "I told you, Jupe. You don't stand a chance. Come on, Bob, show me what you've got!"

Bob sat down, picked up the joystick and drove off.

"I'll beat you yet, Pete," Jupiter announced. "It's all a question of strategy. I've tried an offensive driving style, but maybe the defensive tactics are better."

"But it's also about speed, Jupe. If you crawl across the road at a snail's pace, you lose."

"A calculated risk in terms of speed is acceptable as long as you avoid borderline danger situations," Jupiter said.

Pete rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Just face the facts, Jupe. You can't do it! You don't stand a chance against me in computer games. You won't get anywhere playing computer games."

"Computer games are a strictly logical matter," contradicted Jupiter. "So they can also be denied by strictly logical means. For every situation, there is an optimal behaviour—a strategy—and that is what needs to be found out."

But the Second Investigator shook his head. "I see it quite differently. In games like this, you need intuition. You have to... I don't know... somehow anticipate what comes next, and then decide spontaneously whether to accelerate or brake, whether to swerve to the left or right. There's not much logic in that."

"You obviously didn't anticipate the black Mercedes," Jupiter recalled.

"And yet I have come further than you," Pete replied with a satisfied smile.

The Three Investigators played all evening. At every race, Pete was ahead of his colleagues by a nose and staunchly defended his first place. It got later and later.

Finally, just before midnight, Bob struggled out of his chair and stretched. “Okay, fellas, I’ve had enough. I’m going home now. It’s getting awfully late. Are you coming, Pete?”

Pete nodded tiredly and grabbed his jacket. “Don’t take much longer, Jupe! You’re putting on weight!”

“Good night, Jupe,” Bob said.

“Good night, you two!” Jupiter said and he was immediately absorbed in the game again.

Bob and Pete left Headquarters and stepped out into the cool, starry night. The salvage yard where Headquarters stood was dark and deserted in front of them.

Bob stopped for a moment and breathed deeply in and out. The fresh air did him good. How many hours had he been sitting in front of the computer? Three? Four? Definitely too long. If he was unlucky, the car race would haunt his dreams.

Pete was already unlocking his bike when something clattered behind them. Both were startled and turned around. A bizarrely shaped mountain of scrap metal cut a sharp shadow into the darkness. Next to it stood a small pyramid of car tyres.

“Did you hear that?” whispered Pete.

“I’m not deaf.”

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. I think it came from over there.” Bob pointed to the tyre pyramid and took a step towards it.

Suddenly a shadow came loose from the darkness and jumped towards him. Bob winced and took a step backwards. The shadow hissed past him and disappeared under the trailer.

Bob laughed. “Just a cat.”

“Man,” Pete moaned. “A single noise in the darkness and I feel as if my life is in danger. That’s what you get for years of being a detective. It’s not healthy in the long run.”

The main gate of the salvage yard was locked, but there was a particular point along the wooden fence where there was a secret opening known only to The Three Investigators. Called ‘Red Gate Rover’, they set it up many years ago for them to enter and exit the salvage yard unseen. It consisted of several camouflaged boards, which could be opened by a hidden trigger.

Pete was heading towards Red Gate Rover when he noticed a movement in the sky. He looked up and saw something big and dark sailing through the air over the fence. Pete jumped to the side and almost let go of his bike. With a muffled sound, it landed two metres away from him on the dusty ground.

“That wasn’t a cat!” Pete exclaimed.

Both remained listening. In the distance, street noise could be heard. A dog barked... and then there were steps. On the other side of the fence, someone was walking on the sidewalk. The footsteps slowly receded.

Pete threw a questioning glance at Bob. Bob nodded. For this, they needed no words. After years of detective work and countless solved cases, it had become second nature to them how to behave in such situations.

Bob approached the object lying on the ground, while Pete scurried silently to Red Gate Rover. He removed the latch and pushed the loose boards aside. Carefully he risked a look at the street.

The man who had passed the salvage yard area just disappeared around the next street corner. Pete only recognized that he was tall, slim and carrying something in his hand. The Second Investigator considered whether he should follow the man. But at that moment, a car approached from the other direction. It had turned off its headlights and was barely going faster than walking pace. Pete instinctively flinched to avoid being seen.

The car was an old red Plymouth polished to a high gloss with white wall tyres—a wonderful road cruiser from the fifties. The engine chugged along quietly but powerfully.

As the car glided like a battleship through the cone of light of a street lamp, Pete recognized a blond man at the wheel. Without indicating, he turned right at the next street. For Pete, the situation was clear—the man in the red Plymouth was following the stranger! But why? What was going on here?

Suddenly a hand was placed on his shoulder. Pete suppressed a scream and turned around.

It was Bob, of course, and he could not help laughing. “Why are you so jumpy, Pete?”

“A creepy thing just happened here,” Pete replied and reported what he had seen. “It was a bit like a gangster movie. I wonder if it has something to do with that thing that flew over the fence. What was it?”

Bob raised his right hand and showed him. “A briefcase. The briefcase, to be precise.”

“The briefcase?”

“The briefcase that was already in the bushes when I arrived tonight.” Bob stuck his head through Red Gate Rover and to confirm his suspicion. The briefcase was no longer there. “You don’t have to be a detective to figure out what happened. Someone saw the briefcase standing by the fence and threw it over. Period.”

“And why?”

“No reason. Perhaps someone in the neighbourhood thought that such rubbish would be better off in The Jones Salvage Yard.”

“And what about the Plymouth?” Pete asked.

“Nothing. That was just a coincidence. The headlights were probably not working, and that’s why the car was driving so slow.”

Pete nodded slowly. “This could be true.” He took a look at the briefcase. “Let’s take the thing to Jupe anyway. I’m sure he’ll be interested.”

As Bob and Pete entered Headquarters, the First Investigator flinched. He was still sitting at the computer, but not in front of the car racing game, but at some other program. His right hand made the mouse arrow race across the surface. Obviously he wanted to close all windows as quickly as possible not to reveal to his friends what he was working on.

But Bob immediately smelled a rat. “What are you doing, Jupe? Let me see!”

“I... I just wanted to see if the game had a programming error,” Jupiter claimed and blushed instantly.

“I don’t believe it,” Bob remarked when he finally realized what Jupiter had been trying to hide from him. “Pete, do you know what he’s doing?”

“Actually, no.”

“I can tell you—Jupe just tried to cheat! He wanted to break the high score—but not by winning a race, but simply by going into the program and putting his name in first place.”

“That’s a vicious allegation!” Jupiter intervened.

“Come on, Jupe, you can’t fool me,” Bob said.

“I admit, I wanted to see if it was possible... but that doesn’t mean that I would have done it.”

Pete shook his head in feigned bewilderment. “My trust in you is deeply shaken, Jupiter Jones. So you were going to cheat us. This is what you’ve come to—you’re obsessed with winning. Your ambition has eaten you up to the point where you can’t even lose at a harmless computer game. You’re going to come to a bad end, Jupe.”

“Oh, come on! Why... why did you even come back? What’s that briefcase there, Bob?”

“Some idiot threw the briefcase that was standing by the road over the fence into the salvage yard,” Bob said and together with Pete, told Jupiter in brief what had happened.

“We thought you might be interested,” Bob said. “So, does this thing belong to Uncle Titus now?”

Jupiter frowned and looked at the briefcase in Bob’s hand. “It does indeed look somewhat familiar to me. Is there anything in it?”

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “But it feels like it.”

“Does that mean you haven’t looked inside yet?”

“You would never have forgiven us if we had opened the briefcase without your presence,” Pete said.

“That’s right.” Jupiter swept the empty chip bags aside and lifted the object onto the desk.

Then he pointed the lamp at the case and looked at it in detail. It was held together by a puny clasp in the middle and two thick leather straps at the sides. The brown leather was old, cracked and worn.

“This really looks quite familiar to me,” Jupiter muttered and pinched his lower lip. “But not because I’ve seen it before here at the salvage yard.”

“Well then?” Bob asked.

“If I only knew. Okay, fellas, what do you think is in the case?”

“Dirty laundry,” Bob said.

“A lot of money,” Jupiter said.

“Zombie videos,” Pete said. “All right, whoever is closest will get an ice cream from the others. Agreed?”

Jupiter and Bob nodded with a grin. The First Investigator let the small metal clasp snap open and opened the briefcase.

All three opened their eyes and gasped for breath. They could hardly believe what they saw.

Pete raised his hand to his mouth and uttered a short giggle. “Gross,” he said.

Bob nodded. “This is—”

“Unbelievable!” Jupiter had an adventurous flicker in his eyes. “So fellas, when will I get my ice cream?”

2. Fire!

Money... There was a lot of money in that briefcase. Bundled hundred-dollar banknotes, held together by paper bands... and there were several dozens of them.

Awe-inspiringly, Jupiter reached out his hand and took out one of the bundles. He let his thumb slide over the edges of the paper and estimated the number of banknotes in each bundle.

"Fifty pieces," he said. "Fifty hundred dollar banknotes in a bundle. That makes five thousand dollars a bundle. How many have we got?"

Bob had already started counting. "Forty bundles."

"Then that's two hundred thousand dollars!" cried Pete. "Man! Awesome! Who has that kind of money?"

"And most importantly, why is it flying over our fence and into the salvage yard?" Jupe asked. "The money must have been in the case all along."

Bob swallowed. His throat was suddenly very sore. "It was there for hours! Just like that! Anyone could have taken it!"

"But that didn't happen," Jupiter said. "Instead, someone threw the briefcase over the fence. Isn't that strange? Without looking to see what's inside, would you throw a briefcase onto someone else's property?"

"I may not," Bob said. "And I'm sure you don't either... but not everyone is that curious. Anyway, whoever it was didn't look in the briefcase, otherwise he wouldn't have thrown it away."

"Maybe it was a panic reaction," Pete pondered. "With that kind of money, it's easy to do something rash."

"Oh, that's nonsense," Bob contradicted. "It would be imprudent to take the money on the next plane and emigrate to South America, but not to throw it over a fence. It's not a bomb."

"Well, anyway, here are two hundred thousand dollars on our desk," Pete looked from one to the other. Nobody said anything. "Yes, what is it? Can you think of something to say?"

"What do you want to hear?" Bob asked.

"What should we do with it?" Pete asked. "Do we take the money to the police? Or are we going to South America ourselves?"

"We should wait until tomorrow and go to the police," Jupiter said. "In any case, I will not incur the sacred wrath of Inspector Cotta by calling him in the middle of the night."

"What if we take the case to the station?" Bob asked. "Then we have to answer questions for hours. And, frankly, I'm too tired for that."

"But we can't just leave the briefcase here," Pete said. "It's much too risky."

"I agree with you," Jupiter said. "That's why I'm gonna take it back to my room. There is less risk of it being stolen from under my bed while I'm lying on it. In the morning, we'll—"

Pete uttered a small scream so suddenly that Bob and Jupiter jumped up.

"What's wrong, Pete?" Bob asked, half startled, half angry.

"Nothing, I... I thought I saw something at the window."

Bob and Jupiter looked through the small, dirty window outside into the darkness.

“And what was that?” Jupe asked.

“I don’t know. A shadow or something. But I think it was nothing... or just the cat again.”

“Maybe you are a little overwhelmed,” Bob mocked.

“No wonder,” said Pete. “When there are two hundred thousand dollars in front of me, my nerves are always on edge... every time.”

“And that is why we should all go to sleep now,” Jupiter decided. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll be fresh and rested when we go to the police department, deliver the briefcase and see if we can think of anything else about that red car and the unknown pedestrian. Pete, maybe you really should have followed that guy.”

“Are you insane? I’m glad I didn’t do it! I had a gangster feeling right away. And what happens? Five minutes later, I’m standing in front of a briefcase full of money. The guy in the car could have killed me for sure if I got his attention.”

Jupiter rubbed the root of his nose with thumb and forefinger. “None of this makes any sense. Go home, fellas. We’ll meet again in the morning.”

“Yeah, sure,” Pete said and raised his hand to say goodbye, but without turning his gaze away from the briefcase. “Then for the second time, good night, Jupe... and don’t forget the briefcase! This trailer is not really burglar-proof.”

“Don’t worry,” Jupe assured him.

“Then I wish you sweet dreams,” Bob said with a grin.

“With that kind of money under my bed, I’m sure I’ll have them!”

But Jupiter was to be mistaken.

It was already shortly before 1 am when the First Investigator was finally in his room and pushed the briefcase under the bed. Exhausted, he let himself fall onto the mattress.

The evening had been exciting, and normally he would have had a hard time finding sleep under these circumstances. But he was dog-tired. A briefcase full of money or not, tomorrow was another day to think about it, and until then, he would simply forget about the two hundred thousand dollars and give himself a well-deserved rest.

Faster than usual, Jupiter had brushed his teeth and flung his clothes into the corner, and a minute later, he was already dawdling towards a dreamless deep sleep.

In retrospect, he could no longer say what had woken him. Had it been a noise? A strange light? Or the acrid stench in the air? Whatever it was, Jupiter had the sure feeling that something was wrong even before he was really awake. He took one look at the alarm clock.

It was still deep in the night. He had slept an hour at most. Something stank terribly... and the light—what was wrong with the light? A reddish glow came through the curtains... but sunrise wasn’t for hours.

This stench... and then there was this strange noise—a rustling, a crackling, like from a campfire. A campfire? Fire?

Suddenly Jupiter was wide awake. He jumped out of bed so quickly that the blood sank into his legs and for seconds, he fought against the colourful stars in front of his eyes as he staggered to the window.

When his circulation had stabilized and his vision had cleared up, he saw it—something was burning in the salvage yard and spewing jet-black, stinking soot clouds into the night sky! The flames were as tall as a man and stretched in all directions. Headquarters was only a few metres away from it!

Then it all happened really fast. The door to Jupiter's room was ripped open and Titus Jones stood in the room in striped pyjamas and with hair sticking out of his head, feverishly searching Jupiter's bed for a moment before realizing that his nephew was standing by the window.

"Jupe!" he exclaimed. "Something's burning! Come down!" Then he was out the door again.

Now Jupiter also got going. He threw on a T-shirt, slipped into his sneakers and ran out of the room, down the stairs and out onto the verandah. There he almost collided with Aunt Mathilda, who tightened the belt of her dressing gown and ran after her husband.

The Joneses live in a two-storey house just outside the salvage yard. There was a gate between the house and the yard. Uncle Titus had already ran past the gate into the yard. Jupiter was next, followed by Aunt Mathilda.

"What's burning?" asked Aunt Mathilda anxiously, but did not dare to come closer to the fire.

"I'll have a look," Jupiter decided and ran across the dusty yard.

"Be careful!" Aunt Mathilda cried after him.

Uncle Titus was already at the scene. Finally Jupiter was close enough. He saw that it was the pyramid of car tyres that burned brightly. The rubber was melting and threw bubbles, and the pile tilted precariously to the side. If it tipped over and the burning tyres rolled on the ground, they could set the whole salvage yard on fire. In this vicinity the stench was unbearable.

"We need a hose!" Uncle Titus cried over the hissing of the fire.

All three of them scurried to look for a hose. A few days ago, Jupiter had seen a long garden hose somewhere around all the junk. Now it was only a matter of finding it again as quickly as possible. Jupiter found it among bookcases and flowerpots. He ran back, plugged one end onto the tap and turned it on as far as possible. Uncle Titus took the other end of the hose when it came to life as the water searched its way through. Titus stumbled forward and directed the jet at the blazing flames.

But there was another priority for Jupiter. The fire was really close to Headquarters! The wood of the trailer was very old and dust-dry. If even one spark jumped over, the trailer would be in flames within seconds.

Then Jupiter had an idea. With bated breath, he pushed himself past the heat of the fire, unlocked the door to the trailer, jumped in and put an old pot under the tap of the small sink. While the water ran, Jupiter dug out every container that he could find. Then he ran outside with the pot. He swung out and poured the water onto the outside wall of the trailer. He repeated the same with all the other containers until the outside of the trailer was wet.

In the meantime, Aunt Mathilda was already busy filling a bucket with water from another tap. She ran forward and threw the water into the flames, where it disappeared hissing.

Although the water pressure was not particularly great, Uncle Titus managed to contain the fire after a few minutes. He placed the hose into Aunt Mathilda's hand and took over filling the bucket. Now finally the water attacks had an effect—the flames became smaller and smaller. And when the tower finally toppled over, the burning tyres fell into the large water puddles that had formed on the ground in the meantime, and went out with one last loud hiss.

Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief and put the pot on the ground. The tension fell from him and he just managed to turn off the tap before he lowered himself onto the stairs leading to Headquarters.

He would have preferred never to get up again, as he was suddenly so tired... but Aunt Mathilda immediately pulled him back to reality. "Oh gosh, Jupe! Are you all right? Are you hurt? Did you breathe the smoke?"

"Everything's fine, Aunt Mathilda," assured Jupiter tonelessly. "And you?"

His aunt waved him off. "How could this happen? Why were the tyres burning?" She gave him a stern look. "Jupe, did you set off something here?"

"I was asleep in my bedroom, Aunt Mathilda!" Jupiter defended himself. "Embers can last a long time."

"Maybe someone threw a burning cigarette over the fence," Uncle Titus threw in.

Jupiter shook his head. "Cigarettes don't fly that far."

"All right, then," Aunt Mathilda said. "Nevertheless, car tyres do not catch fire by themselves. What's behind it?"

"Maybe it was just a stupid prank by some teenagers from the neighbourhood," said Titus. "It all worked out fine."

"Or it was..." Jupiter began and fell silent. "It was a diversion," he finally continued whispering.

"A diversion?" Aunt Mathilda echoed and tightened her robe. "What do you mean, a diversion?"

Jupiter jumped up. "I've got to get back into the house!"

"Jupe! What's wrong?" Aunt Mathilda cried.

But the First Investigator was already running across the yard towards the house. Of course! He couldn't believe he didn't think of it right away. There was only one logical explanation for the fire.

He hoped it wasn't too late! He jumped onto the verandah, rushed into the house and took three steps at once on his way up the stairs. He knew he was in danger. If his hunch was right, there might have been a burglar in the house. But he did not care. He had to know for sure.

When he ripped open the door to his room, everything seemed to be the same. No one was here and everything looked the way he'd left it. With a pounding heart, Jupiter let himself get down on his knees and peeked under the bed.

The briefcase was gone!

3. After Him!

“The briefcase is what?” Pete half jumped out of his chair.

“It has been stolen,” Jupiter replied calmly. “Stolen.”

“I don’t believe it!” Bob exclaimed.

The Three Investigators had met at Headquarters the next morning as agreed. But Jupiter’s report on last night’s events ruined their plans. Bob and Pete could hardly believe their ears.

“And you really think the perpetrator set the fire to lure you three out of the house?” Bob asked.

“If you ask me, it’s obvious,” Jupiter replied. “It was all planned precisely... and I was the idiot who fell for it.”

“Well, listen,” Bob said. “I think anyone would’ve fallen for that. Who’d think of a diversionary tactic if there was a fire somewhere? Besides, our headquarters was in acute danger. I can’t even think about it. Imagine if the trailer had really caught fire!”

“Nevertheless,” Jupiter insisted and crossed his arms. “I should have figured it out. A fire in the middle of the night in a salvage yard just can’t be a coincidence.”

“But how did the perpetrator know that the briefcase was hidden in your room?” Pete asked. “In the first place, how did he even know about the briefcase?”

“Well,” Jupiter did. “Think hard.”

“Do you mean you already know the answer?” Pete asked.

“There is really only one logical explanation,” Jupiter said.

Pete frowned. He couldn’t think of anything.

“Of course!” cried Bob suddenly. “We were overheard!” He immediately lowered his voice: “After we opened the briefcase yesterday, we discussed what to do with it. Jupiter said he would take the briefcase to his room. The thief must have been standing outside the trailer and heard everything!”

“Very good, Bob,” praised Jupiter. “That’s exactly how I see it. And if you pursue this thought, you’ll come up with some other amazing deductions.”

“What do you mean?” Pete asked.

“The thief was in the salvage yard listening to us. Question one—what was he doing in the salvage yard?”

“Steal the briefcase” was Pete’s prompt response. “It’s obvious.”

“Right,” Jupiter said. “Question two—how long was he in the salvage yard?”

Pete did not know the answer to this. But Bob had an idea of what Jupiter was getting at. “He’s been there all along! The culprit was hiding in the salvage yard, waiting for someone to throw the briefcase over the fence. It was a handover! But it didn’t happen because we interfered.”

“Very good, Bob!” Jupiter said appreciatively. “That’s exactly what I think. The briefcase flew over the fence, and as chance would have it, it fell right at your feet, so the perpetrator had no opportunity to take it. Then he overheard us and developed the arson plan.”

“Which worked excellently,” Pete noted. “Okay, so it was a failed handover... It makes sense. Unfortunately, we’ll never know what the briefcase and the arsonist are about, because both should be long gone by now.”

Jupiter tried to hide a grin. “I don’t believe it.”

Pete frowned. “Why not?”

“Because the thief has the briefcase, but he should have noticed by now that he can’t do much with a stack of old newspapers!”

“Old newspapers?” Pete wondered. “What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering, Jupiter stood up and opened a hatch hidden on the trailer floor. This was the entrance to Tunnel Two—another one of their old secret passages. It consisted of a narrow, tube that The Three Investigators used as an escape route from the trailer to the outdoor workshop. In the meantime, they had not been using it, but it was still very suitable as a storage and hiding place.

Jupiter bent over the dark tunnel opening and fished out a blue garbage bag that lay next to some files. Triumphantly he placed it on the desk and gave Bob and Pete a look.

“The money!” cried Pete. “But... but...”

Jupiter grinned up to his ears. “Rule number one—never underestimate the intellect of Jupiter Jones!”

For a moment, Bob and Pete were speechless. Then the questions gushed out of them:

“Did you take the money out from the briefcase?”

“Why?”

“Did you know about the thief?”

“Take it easy,” Jupiter said and raised his hands in a calming manner. “It was very simple... Last night, while we were talking about the briefcase, Pete thought he saw something at the window. I don’t know why, but somehow I had the strange feeling that someone was actually there. But I didn’t let on, because I knew that if someone had been sneaking around out there, he had probably heard every word of our conversation.

“After you left, I drew the curtains so as not to be observed, packed the money from the briefcase into this plastic bag and put a stack of old newspapers in it instead. I thought Tunnel Two was a pretty safe place.

“Then I left Headquarters with the briefcase. I expected to be mugged at the salvage yard. It never occurred to me that someone would break into our house. But either way, it was the right precaution.”

“Jupe!” cried Pete enthusiastically. “That’s great! I never realized that my observations had such a great influence on you!”

“So you can see that I have a lot more faith in you than you ever thought,” Jupiter quipped.

“What do we do now?” Bob asked. “Do we take the money to the police?”

“That will be the best,” said Jupiter. “We don’t have to give up on the case... but I’ll feel better if the money is no longer in our possession.”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed across the square.

Bob looked through the window and saw Mathilda and Titus Jones standing next to several boxes and cartons. “Goodness! That looks like work.”

Jupiter went to the door and stuck his head out. “What is it, Aunt Mathilda?”

“Be so kind as to help Titus load the pick-up truck! It’ll only take a second.”

Jupiter sighed. “All right, Aunt Mathilda!” He turned. “Come on, fellas, it’s just a few boxes.”

Jupiter was already on his way out, but then stopped and turned around again. He tied the plastic bag of money and threw the bundle back into Tunnel Two. "Better safe than sorry."

Then The Three Investigators left Headquarters and walked across the cool morning salvage yard towards Uncle Titus.

"I have to take these things to a customer," Titus explained. "He bought a load of things, but couldn't transport it himself. So I'll be taking it to him. It would be nice if you could help quickly. I've got some helpers waiting to unload it."

"No problem, Uncle Titus," Jupiter said.

The Three Investigators joined forces to lift the cartons and boxes onto the pick-up truck. After five minutes, the work was done.

"Thanks, boys!"

They returned to the trailer. "Where were we?" Jupiter asked.

"The money," Pete said. "We decided to take it to the police. Don't even think about doing anything else, Jupe."

"Yes, we'll take it to the police," said the First Investigator nodding, and he walked purposefully towards the floor hatch and opened it. Suddenly the colour disappeared from his face. The plastic bag with the money was gone!

"This... this can't be happening!" stammered Pete. "Where is the bag? You just put it back, Jupe! You put it back five minutes ago."

Jupiter stared silently into the empty shaft. Suddenly he turned around and rushed to the door leading to the back of the trailer where The Three Investigators had set up their laboratory. "We'll get him!" cried Jupiter.

"Who?" Bob asked. "How?"

"The money thief," replied Jupiter, while he feverishly rummaged through one of the filing cabinets that served as a storage for all kinds of equipment.

"How are we going to do that?" asked Pete, who was quite nervous about the First Investigator. "And what are you looking for?"

"This," said Jupiter with relief when he finally found it. He held a small device in front of his friends' noses that looked a bit like an old-fashioned mobile phone with an extremely large display.

"The receiver for our tracking transmitter?" Bob asked in surprise when he recognized the object. "Surely you're not suggesting that we—"

"Yes. I do. I took another precaution last night. I realized that even Tunnel Two is not the safest hiding place for two hundred thousand dollars. So I hid our transmitter between the money so we could track it at any time in case it got lost. But you know the problem with this thing? The range is very limited. If the transmitter is too far away, we have no way of tracking it."

A few months ago, Jupiter had constructed a completely new receiver from old electronic waste. Since then the receiver was not only able to determine the distance of the transmitter, but also the direction in which it was located.

Jupiter switched on the receiver. A small green dot flashed on the display, slowly moving away from the centre.

"The transmitter is on the move," Bob noted. "Heading east... and pretty quickly. If we don't hurry, he'll be—"

"—Out of range soon," Jupiter finished the sentence and was halfway out the door. "Come on, fellas! Pete, start your car!"

"But... but I came on my bike!"

"Huh? Bob, what about you?"

“Also on my bike.”

“Darn! What do we do now?” Jupe exclaimed.

“Your uncle!” cried Pete.

“I hope he hasn’t left yet!” Jupe yelled.

The Three Investigators rushed outside to the salvage yard, where the engine of the old pick-up truck had just started up and it was moving.

“Uncle Titus!” Jupiter cried in horror and ran towards the truck. “Uncle Titus! Wait!”

Titus Jones did not seem to hear his nephew over the loud rattling of the diesel engine. He drove through the open gate, signalled left and rolled slowly onto the road.

Pete sprinted off, overtook Jupiter with ease and was on the road within seconds. Waving wildly, he followed the pick-up truck, which accelerated more and more. “Look in the rear view mirror!” Pete thought.

Uncle Titus reached the first intersection, slowed down, signalled right—and stopped.

“Yes!” cried Pete. “Stop right there, Mr Jones!”

Finally Pete ran up and stopped next to the driver’s door, breathing heavily.

Titus Jones rolled down the side window and looked at him confused and slightly worried. “Pete! What’s the matter? Did I forget a box?”

“We... need your... truck,” the Second Investigator rattled.

“My truck? Is your car broken? Well, I don’t mind, but, you know, I gotta drop this stuff off first. This won’t take long. I’ll be back in an hour at the latest—”

“We need it now!” Pete interrupted him, feeling guilty instantly. Jupiter’s uncle was one of the most kind and loving people he knew. But The Three Investigators did not have a second to lose.

Now Jupiter and Bob also came running and Pete was glad that the First Investigator could take over the helm now.

“Must... take... us... with you,” he stuttered. The short spurt had completely exhausted him.

“Take you where? What’s going on?” Titus asked.

“No time to explain,” Jupiter replied, circled the truck and got in on the passenger side. Bob and Pete climbed up to the cargo area which had a restraint system for passengers. Luckily, Uncle Titus was not transporting too many items so the two of them found space between the boxes.

“Drive off! Head east!” Jupe exclaimed.

Titus Jones still had no idea what was going on. But there was one thing he had learned over the years when his nephew and his friends were active as detectives—there were situations in which one was best advised to simply trust Jupiter, no matter how bizarre his behaviour was. Then there was a determination in everything his nephew did that Titus could not counter. This was such a situation.

And so Titus Jones put the truck in first gear, turned the steering wheel in the opposite direction and drove east.

4. An Old Acquaintance

Jupiter stared at the display of the receiver. The green dot had disappeared. "Bummer!"

Bob stuck his head through the open rear window into the driver's cab. "What's wrong?"

"We've lost the signal!" Jupiter said. "But it's not too late, maybe we can catch up..."

Uncle Titus, could you drive a little faster?"

"I'm happy to help you with whatever you're doing, but don't ask me to disobey the highway code."

Jupiter bit his lower lip. "It's okay. Thanks, by the way."

"You're welcome. I wonder if I could find out what's going on here?" Uncle Titus asked.

"We're chasing someone," Jupiter narrowly said.

"I thought so. And why?"

"An unidentified man stole a blue garbage bag."

Uncle Titus nodded understandingly. "That is a serious crime. How much is it worth? Fifty cents?"

Jupiter smiled. "Of course there was something in it."

"I suppose there's no point in asking you what that was?"

For a moment, Jupiter really thought about telling his uncle the truth. But as a result he would probably have rammed the pick-up truck right into the next tree.

"Uncle Titus, I'm sure you don't want to know the details."

Titus Jones thought about it for a while. Then finally he nodded. "Perhaps you are right. I just hope it's nothing dangerous."

"Don't worry, Uncle Titus, we can take care of ourselves!"

They were moving towards the outskirts of Rocky Beach. The development became more and more sparse. They still had no signal.

"Jupe, if the guy has turned off somewhere, we have no chance of finding him again!" cried Pete from behind.

"I know that... but what should we do?" Jupiter replied. "Without the slightest clue as to where he might have disappeared to, it is best to continue straight ahead. If we still don't have a signal in ten minutes..." Jupiter fell silent. "Wait! There it is again! We have a signal again! Uncle Titus, turn right at the next junction!"

Titus Jones flicked the indicator. The green dot approached the centre of the display as the pick-up truck moved in the new direction. Uncle Titus registered this with a quick sideways glance. Unwillingly, he now accelerated.

"We'll make it," Jupiter cried enthusiastically and looked strained alternately at the display and at the road ahead. Nothing and nobody was to be seen yet, but they came closer and closer to the target. "There, to the left again!"

They turned into a street in which there were only a few, dilapidated houses. The gardens in that area were neglected and overgrown, and the driveways and walls were partly impenetrable like a jungle. Wrecked cars stood on the lawns rusting away. Half of the houses did not seem to be inhabited anymore. There was nobody on the street, but directly in front of them, about a hundred metres away, a taxi stopped.

"Stop, Uncle Titus!" cried Jupiter.

Titus Jones was so startled that he stepped on the brakes without thinking. The tyres squeaked and Jupiter was thrown forward roughly. Behind him on the cargo area there was a rumbling noise. Jupiter turned around.

Pete banged his face on the back window. "Ouch!"

Uncle Titus went pale. "Excuse me! Are you all right?"

"Yes," Bob muttered, rubbing his knee.

Jupiter ducked reflexively and peered over the dashboard into the street ahead. A man got out of the taxi. No, it was not a man but a teenager. He was small and wiry, had reddish blond tousled hair, fair skin and looked like a nervous squirrel. With both hands, he was holding a blue plastic bag.

The taxi drove on and the boy looked around rashly. For a moment, his gaze got stuck on the pick-up truck. Jupiter crouched even lower. And Uncle Titus grabbed a chamois leather in a flash and began to polish the windscreen.

"Did he see me?" whispered Jupiter, although the boy would certainly not have heard him from that distance.

"I don't think so," Uncle Titus buzzed through the corner of his mouth and stubbornly worked on a non-existent stain. "Now he's going over to that run-down house at the end of the street. He walks around it... and off he goes. The coast is clear." Jupiter sat up and looked back.

Bob and Pete had also taken cover in time and were now peering out again.

"What now?" Pete asked.

"No question, we'll follow him," Jupiter decided. "He must not escape us! Come on, fellas!"

"What about me?" asked Uncle Titus, who obviously did not quite know what was happening. "Do you still need me? I mean... shall I help you? Or maybe... keep a lookout or whatever you call it?"

"No need," Bob replied. "We can handle that kid on our own."

"Thank you, Uncle Titus. You can go for your delivery now. We owe you one!"

Titus Jones grinned and his moustache curled up. "I'll come back to that."

Bob and Pete climbed down from the back of the truck while Jupiter got out. Together they crept towards the old house where the red-headed boy had went in. Uncle Titus accelerated, waved once more and drove away.

There was no cover in the street, so The Three Investigators hurried. The closer they got to the house, the more obvious it became that it was uninhabited. What colour the wooden walls had originally been was now almost impossible to make out. The paint had flaked off everywhere. All window panes were either broken or nailed up with boards. There was a big hole in the roof. The undergrowth in the garden ran up and covered half of the verandah, whose railing protruded into the nothingness at an unnatural angle like the broken wing of a bird.

Pete jumped athletically over something that might once have been a fence and ducked behind the thorny bushes. Bob and Jupiter hurried to follow him.

"What a dump," said the Second Investigator after looking at the building for a while. "But there's one advantage. Thanks to all this brushwood, we can get to the other side unnoticed."

They circled halfway around the house so that they could not be seen from the street. Then they looked for a window whose glass was broken out far enough to climb through. They found one.

Pete carefully peered inside the house.

“What do you see?” Jupiter asked quietly.

“Not much. A lot of dirt.” Pete put his hands on the window sill and pulled himself up. A moment later, he was already inside.

“Hey, Pete!” Bob said in surprise. “How come you’re so brave today?”

The Second Investigator raised his eyebrows. “Am I supposed to be afraid of that kid? Hurry up, or do you want to wait until the guy has hidden the money so well that we’ll never find it again?”

Bob and Jupiter also climbed through the window. With Jupiter, it took a little longer. They looked around. The room was completely empty. On the floor was a greasy layer of dust and dirt. The walls were smeared with graffiti. Here and there were holes in the wall.

The Three Investigators listened. From somewhere, there were soft voices coming to them. Jupiter tiptoed out of the door following the voices, which slowly grew louder.

Two doors away, in a dark room whose shutters were closed and nailed shut, they were finally very close to the voices. Through a hole in the thin plasterboard wall, a ray of sunlight fell to the floor. It was big enough to stick a head through. But The Three Investigators refrained from doing that. They didn’t want to take the risk of being discovered. Besides, every word could be clearly heard and understood.

“I’ll tell you, man, I really didn’t think I could get the money. At first, the two guys almost spotted me when they went past my hiding place behind the tyres. Man, and I almost burned the place down last night! And then this fat guy Jones looked right at the situation and fooled me!

“This morning, when I crept behind the old trailer and overheard them. Someone suddenly called out for him. The three of them went out, but the door was left open. So of course, I went right in, opened the bottom hatch, and there was the bag. Anyway, I grabbed it and ran. I didn’t turn around again. Luckily, a taxi came my way. So... here I am.”

The other person, who had listened in silence to the hectic, nervously voiced report, laughed. And The Three Investigators held their breath.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob immediately recognized to whom the dirty laughter belonged. They had heard it so many times in the past—just too many. There was no doubt who he was. Only one person could put so much malice, spite and hubris into one short sound...

Skinny Norris!

5. Control is Better

“Well done, Mike. I wonder if those three wannabe detectives have noticed that the money is gone yet. They might be surprised! Man, I can’t believe those guys are always getting in my way.”

Pete was about to burst. At that moment, he had completely forgotten what situation he was in—Skinny’s accomplice, the bag of money—he didn’t care. He just wanted to tell Skinny what he thought, nothing else counted.

Skinny Norris! Their eternal arch-enemy who had been getting in their way ever since the beginning of their detective career. He was the sleaziest, most arrogant, nastiest puke that they knew. He was only a little older than The Three Investigators, but he always put on a big show. On top of that, he had put the three of them in considerable danger many times. There were many good reasons to hate Skinny Norris.

Pete clenched his fists. He was ready to give up his cover and face Skinny. But then Jupiter put his hand on Pete’s shoulder. The First Investigator looked him straight in the eyes and shook his head. It was not easy for Pete, but he relaxed a bit. Once again, Jupiter was right—whatever Skinny was planning, they had a better chance of finding out if they stayed in the background.

Nevertheless, Pete bent forward and risked a short look through the hole in the wall. There they sat, Skinny and his accomplice Mike, cross-legged on the dirty wooden floor. Between them was the opened bag with the money. Mike kept bouncing his legs and nervously pulled a cigarette while Skinny slowly and with relish took one bundle after the other out of the bag and ecstatically fanned himself with the banknotes.

“Never mind,” Skinny continued. “We have the money. That’s all that matters. We finally made it! We’re rich! And neither Wagner nor Calhoon have any idea that we’ve been messing with them. Is there anything else that matters? I’ve been waiting for this chance all my life. As soon as Calhoon gets Wagner, I can get out of Wagner’s business without any fuss. I’ll be gone and I’ll never have to see Rocky Beach again. And those three unbearable bogus detectives can annoy whoever they want, as they’ll never bother me again!”

Pete looked at his friends. Their looks said it all. All three agreed that they wouldn’t miss Skinny if he actually left town. But until then, they could only hope. Whatever crooked thing was going on here, they wouldn’t let Skinny off scot-free. He would not disappear with two hundred thousand dollars in cash, which he certainly had not obtained legally. No way!

Mike got more and more nervous. His whole body was shivering. He pulled his cigarette so frantically that the ashes fell on his pants and he didn’t even notice. “There’s something else, man. There’s something else we need to talk about.”

Now Skinny got suspicious. “About what?”

“Well, how shall I put it...” Mike said. “Regarding splitting the money, I... I think... we could share it a little more fairly.”

“Twenty percent for you and eighty for me is more than fair,” Skinny replied coldly.

“Hey, man, that was really totally exhausting! I mean... the waiting, and hiding and stuff. And the whole fire thing wasn’t planned. Well, actually, technically, I kind of did all the work. You just threw the briefcase over the fence! But I’ve had all the stress. First, the two

guys get in my way. Then I have to lure a whole family out of the house, and then the briefcase is empty—I tell you, I really needed nerves! Another person would probably have gone crazy. But I hung in there, man. For that, I think I’ve earned a little more than twenty percent!”

“You get twenty percent of what’s in this bag for eight hours in that junkyard. That’s a damn good hourly rate.”

“And what about you?” Mike asked.

“What about me? I developed the plan! Without me, this thing wouldn’t have worked at all! Besides, the most difficult part is still ahead of me. I have to make sure that the suspicion doesn’t fall on us after all. By the way, any messenger boy could have done your job.”

“Messenger boy! Do you know what Calhoon will do to me if he finds out that I’m involved? I would be dead, man!”

“Twenty percent,” Skinny said in an icy voice and ended the discussion unequivocally. “And as for Calhoon, if he or Wagner even suspects we swindled them, we’re both dead.”

Mike obviously realized that he had no chance to change Skinny’s mind. He kept his mouth shut, lit another cigarette and silently watched as Skinny took bundle after bundle of money out of the bag, counted it and divided it into three differently sized piles.

“Forty thousand dollars,” Skinny finally said and pushed the middle pile to him. “With that little pile, we’re framing Zia. The rest is for me.”

Mike hurried to stuff the money into the backpack he had brought with him. “Okay, man. I’m out of here. It’s better not to be seen together. Good luck with Zia!” He picked himself up, grabbed his backpack and turned around.

“Mike,” Skinny held him back, and his voice got icy. “If you slip up with Calhoon, if the guy gets wind of me because of you, if you mess up—you’re gone.”

Mike laughed nervously. “Hey, man, do I look that stupid? You got nothing to fear from me!”

“All right, then.”

Mike left. Skinny waited until his footsteps had moved away, then with both hands, he grabbed the largest of the stacks of money, lifted it up and let the banknotes rain down on his head. He laughed shrilly.

Pete turned to Bob and Jupiter and formed a silent question with his lips—‘What now?’

Jupiter made a reassuring gesture—‘Wait and see.’

The Three Investigators did not have to watch Skinny Norris take his money shower for long because suddenly, hurried steps approached. And then Mike stood in the doorway, breathing fast and with an expression of panic in his eyes. “Damn! Wagner is here!”

Skinny jumped to his feet. “What?”

“His flashy car is right outside the door!” Mike whispered frantically. “He just got out! He’s coming this way, Skinny!”

Even from his hiding place, Pete could see how Skinny was losing the colour from his face. For a moment, it looked like he was going to collapse. “Give me the backpack, Mike!”

“What?”

“Do you want Wagner to find the money with you or me? Give me the backpack!”

Skinny didn’t wait for Mike’s reaction. He ripped the backpack off his back, tore at the zip and poured the money back into the blue plastic bag. Hectically, he also picked up the other bundles that were scattered on the dirty floor. Within seconds, the money was back in the bag.

Already, heavy steps were approaching. Skinny looked around in panic.

“Where to now?” asked Mike in a trembling voice.

Skinny's eyes fell on the hole in the wall. Pete flinched at the last second. Did Skinny see him?

Suddenly, he went towards the opening. And without even looking through, he squeezed the bag out the hole.

Plop! Two hundred thousand dollars landed at Pete's feet for the second time in ten hours.

A second later, the door to the room was ripped open and a small but strong man in a brown suit entered. He was obviously wearing an ill-fitting toupée, the colour of which matched that of his remaining real hair only with a lot of imagination.

Behind him stood an athletic man who towered over him by one head. He was considerably younger, wore sporty clothes and had a platinum blond military short hairstyle. His look was hard and cold.

"Mr Wagner! Beaumont!" cried Skinny a little too loud and nervous. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Pay you a visit, Skinny," said Mr Wagner with a booming bass voice lacking any trace of friendliness. "And who have we here—Mike Watson—Calhoon's errand boy. I never knew you two were buddies."

"Well, we're just old pals, Mr Wagner, and..." Mike started, but he was abruptly interrupted by Skinny.

"Mike just told me what happened. Is it true? The money is gone? That's why you're here, isn't it, Mr Wagner? Believe me, I had nothing to do with it!"

"So you already know," Wagner said sharply and squint his little eyes together. Then he took a few steps towards Skinny, who automatically backed off. "How convenient. It's true. Calhoon never got the money. There were only old magazines in the briefcase... or so he says. Now he thinks I set him up. But I didn't. The two hundred grand was in the briefcase that you gave Zia. It never got to Calhoon. What do you think, Skinny? What does that tell you?"

Skinny swallowed audibly. "That... that something went wrong at the drop?"

Wagner smiled coldly. "Clever boy."

"But everything went according to plan, sir!" Skinny said. "Really! I met Zia at the agreed meeting point, I gave her my briefcase, she gave me hers... and nothing unusual happened on the way there and back! You've got to believe me. I—"

"Shut up, Skinny!" Wagner silenced him. "I know you dropped the money off at Zia's. You think I'm gonna let you walk around Rocky Beach unguarded with two hundred thousand dollars?"

For a moment, Skinny was speechless. "But... but you did!"

Wagner laughed out loud. The laughter turned into an unhealthy cough. "How stupid do you think I am?" He pointed his thumb at his gigantic, mute companion.

"Beaumont was watching you. I know you did your job well. On the other hand..." His eyes narrowed and his gaze wandered to Mike. "On the other hand, I see little Mike Watson here, and I wonder what you're doing with Calhoon's errand boy."

"Nothing at all, sir," Skinny was quick to assure him.

"We're just old pals," Mike repeated. "I know Skinny hangs out here sometimes and I wanted to see if he was around to tell him about the missing money."

"Maybe Zia took the money away and gave the briefcase with the magazines to Mr Calhoon," Skinny thought aloud. "And now she says I did it..."

Wagner nodded silently.

Skinny continued: "Or else Mr Calhoon took the money and made it all up just to..."

“To set me up!” yelled Wagner. “Let me tell you something, you little wise guy... I’ve figured that out for myself! The problem is—” Wagner’s gaze fell on Mike, and he interrupted himself. “Beat it, kiddo.”

“Wh... what?” Mike stuttered.

“I told you to beat it! Go away!”

“Hey, man, I—” Mike began.

Beaumont took a step forward and Mike fell silent immediately. He reached for his backpack, gave Skinny a hard-to-interpret look and left the room.

Wagner waited until Mike’s footsteps had faded away, then continued in a lowered but no less sharp voice: “The problem is that I have to prove that to Calhoon first! The guy wants to finish me. He just needs a reason. And he has one now. Tonight he wants us to go to his place to clear up the matter—the three of us. If we don’t show up, he’ll bust us up. So you’ll be there, Skinny, you hear me?”

Skinny nodded nervously. “All right.”

“8 pm at Calhoon’s house. Get it?”

“Sure, boss. 8 pm. But—”

“But what?”

“Sir, may I ask what you intend to do to get out of this in one piece?”

“I must find the money!”

“And how?”

“I don’t know!” Wagner shouted so violently that his toupée moved a little. Then he turned his head towards his companion. “Beaumont, search this house!”

“What?” Skinny said with a croak. “This house? Why? It’s just an old dump. Do you think the money is here?” He laughed shrilly.

Wagner shook his head. “No. I don’t. I trust you, Skinny... but as the saying goes: ‘Trust is good, control is better’. Go on, Beaumont. Start with Skinny’s bag, then search every room.”

6. Furious

Beaumont, who had not said a word until then, set himself in motion just as silently. But that was all The Three Investigators could hear. Pete was already on his way back to the window which they had climbed through. This Beaumont guy was as big as polar bear. If he got his hands on them...

The Second Investigator was not yet completely out of the room when he felt something rustled behind him. He turned around. Jupiter had picked up the plastic bag from the floor. He wasn't thinking of doing so... He had just done it!

Pete stared at the First Investigator and signalled to him to abandon the bag. But as expected, Jupiter didn't think of it at all, but shooed Pete out of the room. They had no time to lose! One after another, they crept out of the window into the garden.

Only here did Pete dare to speak: "Have you gone completely crazy, Jupe? How could you just take the money?"

"That's what we came here for, isn't it, or did I remember it wrongly?" Jupe answered.

"That's before we knew that a whole bunch of gangsters were after the money!" Pete whispered back.

"Can we please discuss this later?" Bob urged. "I'd like to be out of range when Mr Wagner and this Beaumont guy come out of the house."

They hurried through the overgrown garden to the road. In front of the dilapidated house stood a red Plymouth. Uncle Titus, of course, had long left... and buses didn't run in this area.

"Let's get a taxi," Bob suggested. "In any case, just get out of here!"

All the time they looked around in the constant fear that Skinny or Mr Wagner might appear behind them. But no one was chasing after them. They had to walk to the nearest major road before a taxi came by. Pete waved it over, and they got back to the salvage yard safely. All the while, Jupiter held on to the plastic bag like a life preserver.

"That'll be exactly eight dollars," said the taxi driver as he stopped in front of the gate to The Jones Salvage Yard.

"Hey, does any of you have any money on you?" Jupiter asked and denied himself a laugh. On his lap lay two hundred thousand dollars, and he asked his friends for eight dollars.

Bob and Pete shook their heads.

"You'll have to pay me, boys," the driver said somewhat annoyed.

"Don't worry, we'll get the money," Jupiter replied and inconspicuously pushed his hand into the bag. With a hundred dollar note between his fingers, he pulled it out again. "Do you have change for this?"

A little later, The Three Investigators were sitting at Headquarters. Pete paced up and down like a caged animal. Jupiter sat on his office chair, the blue bag on his lap and with both hands firmly clasped. Bob kept looking out of the small window to the yard.

But out there was just a normal Saturday morning. The customers strolled past the displays while Aunt Mathilda was busily walking back and forth selling junk.

"So what now, Jupe? Will you finally call the police?" Pete asked.

"Take it easy, Pete. Everything's fine for now. The money is safe. There's no reason to rush into anything. Let's just take our time and think things over."

"What's there to think about?" Pete argued. "There are two hundred thousand dollars lying around here that some gangsters want to push back and forth. The best thing to do is give the money to the police and we'll be out of this."

"If the police take over, we'll never know what this is all about," Jupe countered.

"So what? My curiosity is limited," Pete snapped. "Geez, Jupe, I'm just a teensy bit nervous, when you're rocking two hundred thousand dollars back and forth on your lap. Can you possibly understand that?"

"I'm nervous too," Bob said. "But I would like to know what's going on."

"Why don't we summarize the facts first," Jupiter suggested. "Afterwards we can always call Inspector Cotta. So what do we know?"

"Skinny works as an errand boy for this Mr Wagner," Bob replied. "He was supposed to give the briefcase to a certain Zia, who in turn will pass the money on to Mr Calhoon. But that didn't work out."

"And why not?" Jupiter asked and answered his question himself: "Because Skinny exchanged the briefcase for another. Sure, now the whole story makes sense! ... Pete, didn't you tell us that last night, a red Plymouth was going down the street at walking pace? It was after the guy who allegedly threw the briefcase over the fence? That guy was Skinny."

"He came round earlier with a briefcase that looked exactly the same, except that it was filled with old magazines. He put that briefcase in the bushes by the road. That's where Bob saw it."

"Later on, Skinny came past the salvage yard with the money briefcase and was watched by the driver of the red Plymouth, who was almost certainly Beaumont. But there must have been a few seconds in which Skinny was unobserved, namely when he turned the corner. At that moment, he switched cases. In passing, he threw the money briefcase over the fence, took the other one instead and continued his way as if nothing had happened."

"The money briefcase was supposed to be taken by his accomplice Mike, who was hiding here in the salvage yard. But as luck would have it, the case fell at your feet. Mike saw this and did everything he could to get the briefcase back."

During Jupiter's recount of the events, Pete's walk through Headquarters had become slower and slower. Finally he had stopped completely and drove thoughtfully through his hair. "This is exactly how it could have been. Way to go, Jupe. How do you always manage to make sense of a completely confusing story?"

"Logic, Pete," Jupiter replied objectively. "Intuition may help in computer games, but it gets in the way of answering tricky questions."

"Well, let's see if you can use logic on the next question," Bob said. "What's this whole story about? We just dragged two hundred thousand dollars halfway across town... Are they drug dealers? Should Wagner get a briefcase full of drugs in return? Or weapons? Or jewellery? So it was a handover. Skinny gave this Zia a briefcase and received one himself. But what was in it?"

"To answer this question, we definitely do not have enough information. And that's why I think we should definitely stay on the case. We could take the money to the police now, but then we will never know what kind of shady story Skinny Norris is involved in this time. And frankly, I'd be very interested to know."

"Oh, boy," Pete moaned and rubbed his temples. "I have a bad feeling about this. Can we at least put the money in a safe? Somewhere really safe! I can't relax otherwise."

Before Jupiter could answer, Bob drew attention to himself. He had looked out the window and spotted something he didn't like at all. "Fellas! There's trouble!"

"The gangsters?" cried Pete in horror. "They are here? Gosh, Juve! What did I tell you! They have found us! Now it's our turn to face the music!"

"Take it easy, Pete," Bob said. "It's not the gangsters. It's just Skinny."

"Skinny?" Pete sighed in relief. "I see. Well, it's still bad enough."

"Is he alone?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes. And he's coming right to us here," Bob said.

"Why is that?" Pete asked. "He doesn't even know what we know, does he?"

"We'll find out. First, I'll hide the money!" Jupiter decided and jumped up. He opened the floor hatch to Tunnel Two, threw the bag into the underground passage and let the hatch close again.

At that moment, there was an energetic knock on the door.

"What do we do now?" whispered Pete.

"What can we do?" Jupiter replied calmly. "Talk to Skinny! That's one of our favourite things. I can't wait to see what kind of story he'll tell us."

There were more knocks. Jupiter went slowly to the door and opened it. One look at Skinny's face was enough. With a furious look and grinding jaws, he stood before Jupiter and sparkled at him furiously.

Jupiter played surprised. "Skinny Norris! What a surprise! It's really nice of you to drop by, but I don't think we have an appointment." Jupiter was about to slam the door. Although he was curious what Skinny had to say, he did not want to make it too easy for him.

But Skinny put his foot in the door, forced it open and entered the trailer. "Very funny, fatso! One more crack out of you and I'll kick your butt!"

Immediately Pete and Bob were at Jupiter's side. "You want trouble, Skinny?" Pete asked threateningly. "You can have it! I'll take you on anytime!"

"I don't want trouble, I want my money!" Skinny barked back.

"If your cash flow is at risk, turn to your employer or your parents, not to us," Jupiter calmly replied.

"Don't talk rubbish, fatso! You know exactly what I'm talking about! Mike saw you walk out of the house with a bag under your arm! He was still around. I don't know how you found us, but I don't care. You have nothing to do with this! Give me my money!"

Skinny's otherwise pale face was flaming red. It was the most aggressive look The Three Investigators had ever seen from him. Of course he wouldn't have had a chance in a physical confrontation, but still The Three Investigators didn't want to take the chance.

"All right, Skinny, let's play with our cards on the table," Jupiter said. "We have the money, you're right. However, I strongly doubt that that is your money. I also consider your claim that we had nothing to do with it to be very daring. After all last night, a briefcase full of money flew into our salvage yard, and a few hours later my aunt, uncle and I had our hands full preventing a major fire from breaking out. And that, Skinny, concerns us."

"Major fire?" asked Skinny. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You should know by now that we don't let ourselves be fooled so easily," Bob replied angrily. "We know you threw the money over the fence for Mike to take it... and that Mike set a fire at the yard here so that he could get to the briefcase in Jupiter's room. So don't tell us that you don't know anything about that!"

Skinny took a breath, opened his mouth—and closed it again. For seconds, he stared at The Three Investigators in rage. "You busybodies! You really think you can meddle in

everything, don't you? The good, noble, virtuous and spotless 'Three Instigators'! Always mouthing off about things that don't concern you. Stay out of my business!"

Pete laughed. "That's the limit! Did we ask you to throw two hundred thousand dollars at our feet?"

"I suggest we end this fruitless discussion," Jupiter said. "The linguistic level is beneath my dignity. Goodbye, Skinny... or no, maybe it's better—"

"You dumb fool, you don't seem to understand me at all!" Suddenly, Skinny grabbed Jupiter by the collar and pushed him backwards against the wall. He was so fast that neither Bob nor Pete could react in time. "I want my money!"

Bob and Pete pulled Skinny back. "That's enough!" yelled Pete. "Get out of here and don't come back!"

But Skinny didn't even think about it. "I need the money."

"Why?" Jupiter barked back.

"Because it's mine!"

"Wrong," Bob replied. "It belonged to Mr Wagner, and now it should be with Mr Calhoon. You stole it. Do you think we're stupid?"

"How do you bums know all this?"

"Because we are not bums," Pete replied.

"Okay, okay," Jupiter said and raised his hands reassuringly. "I suggest we approach the subject less heatedly. Skinny, you want the money back. Let me assure you of one thing—you won't get it..."

"You have no right to it!" yelled Skinny.

"We not only have the right, but even the duty to take two hundred thousand dollars that flew over our fence to the police!" Bob burst out.

"People!" cried Jupiter. "I said less heated! You didn't let me finish, Skinny. I wanted to say you won't get the money until you tell us in detail what's going on. I wanna know who Wagner and Calhoon are... What have you got to do with them... What part Mike, Zia and Beaumont are playing... What business you are all involved in, and why did you throw that briefcase on our property, of all places."

"This does not concern you—" Skinny started, but didn't finish. He seemed to have realized that this argument didn't get him anywhere. For a few seconds, he just stared at Jupiter. Then he asked in a calmer but no less threatening voice: "What are you going to do? Are you going to have Wagner and Calhoon busted? Forget it! Those guys are dangerous! They're not gonna be taken in so easily."

"So you tried?" Bob reminded him.

"And failed," Pete added. "Not because Wagner or Calhoon got in your way, but because we did."

"That's right, Pete," Jupiter said. "So you see, Skinny... No matter what happens, you have to deal with us first. Since this fact should be as unpleasant for you as it is for us, I suggest we get it over with and you just tell us what we want to know."

7. The Pact

Skinny had no choice. Despite grinding his teeth and extremely reluctant, he had to reveal all. Jupiter asked his questions so cleverly that Skinny didn't notice what The Three Investigators already knew and what they didn't.

It was not the first time that Skinny Norris was involved with criminal or at least semi-criminal circles. Through some old contacts, he had involved himself with Wagner, who lived on crooked things and shady deals of any kind. Wagner offered Skinny a well-paid job, if he did some henchman tasks for him.

Skinny thought Wagner was an idiot, but sensed the chance to get a lot of money easily and accepted the offer. He worked for Wagner for weeks. He washed his car, got rid of business partners on the phone and did small errands. In the process he gradually got to know Wagner's dealings.

Beaumont had been working for Wagner for years and was something like his right hand. Calhoon, on the other hand, was a business partner, but he was intellectually and financially far superior to Wagner. Wagner hated Calhoon, but was dependent on him.

Then there was the money handover, which Skinny was asked to do, and he scented his big chance. It turned out that Jupiter was right with most of his conjectures. However, some points were still unclear.

"Why were you used as a money messenger anyway?" Jupiter asked. "Wouldn't it have been easier if Wagner had brought the money to Calhoon personally? Middlemen always pose a risk."

"For show," Skinny replied. "Firstly, the delivery was mainly for show. Wagner wanted to prove to Calhoon that he wouldn't handle such paltry sums personally, but would rather send an errand boy. Of course, two hundred thousand is a lot of money for Wagner too, but he cannot admit that. I tell you, he's a stupid man."

"Secondly, he wanted to test me. I haven't been working for him for long. He wanted to see if he could trust me. So he sent me out and had Beaumont, his right-hand man, watch me. But I am not stupid. Of course, I knew Beaumont wouldn't let me out of his sight."

"That's why you hid a briefcase, which looks exactly the same, in the bushes by the fence beforehand," Jupiter concluded the thought. "It only took you a second or two to make the exchange. Since the place is right on the street corner and Beaumont hadn't turned into yet, he had lost sight of you for a brief moment. I suppose that was also the reason why you chose the salvage yard for the transaction. It was the only place on the road from Wagner to Zia that provided you the opportunity for this manoeuvre."

"Smart ass," Skinny mumbled inaudibly and then continued louder: "That's exactly how it was. And you can be sure, Jones, that I certainly wouldn't have chosen your filthy dump if there had been any other place."

"I must say, Skinny, that's a pretty elaborate plan," Jupiter ignored the remark. "Thanks to the fact that you were under surveillance for most of the time, no one will seriously suspect that you made the money disappear. No, Calhoon and Wagner will suspect each other, and maybe they'll both agree that Zia switched the case... but they'll never come after you. Very smart."

“Save your hogwash! I want the money now!” Skinny demanded.

“We are far from finished,” Jupiter continued. “Now that we have clarified exactly what happened last night, I would like to know why it happened. What kind of business is this about, Skinny? What did Wagner have to pay Calhoon two hundred thousand dollars for?”

“Counterfeit money,” Skinny replied. “Calhoon produces first class fakes... but he’s smart enough not to put them into circulation himself. That’s why he sells the fake banknotes to idiots like Wagner at the exchange rate of one to ten. Wagner pays two hundred thousand real dollars and gets two million fake ones in return.”

“And this is supposed to be good business?” Pete doubted it.

“Yes,” replied Jupiter. “Calhoon takes no risk of being caught with the fakes. If he did, he would go straight to prison. He leaves that to other people. Since the production of counterfeit money costs even less, one to ten is still a good deal.”

Skinny nodded. “It’s good that you are so smart, Jones.”

“Where does Calhoon make the counterfeit money?” Jupiter asked. “At his house?”

“I have no idea,” Skinny shrugged, “and even if I did, I sure wouldn’t tell the three of you bozos.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jupiter calmly claimed. “The more I think about it, the less I want to have to rely on your statements alone. I think we’ll be in close proximity tonight and see for ourselves.”

“What?” cried Bob, Pete and Skinny as if from one mouth.

“You can’t be serious!” Pete said.

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

“Yes!” Pete exclaimed. “We’ll take the money to the police and send Inspector Cotta and his men to Calhoon’s house at 8 pm tonight to arrest the gang and be done with it!”

“No way!” hissed Skinny. “That’s my money! You won’t mess up my plans!”

“Who’s gonna stop us?” Bob asked casually. “Are you?”

Skinny shook with rage. He clenched his fists, and for a moment Bob really thought he was going to strike. But then Skinny suddenly relaxed. Slowly, a little smile crept onto his face. “Yeah, me. You may not have noticed, but you need me.”

Pete laughed. “We need you? Nobody needs you, Skinny. We drop the money off at the police department and send the police to Calhoon. Done. You’re not in the plan at all.”

Before Skinny could answer, Jupiter spoke up. “We won’t do that, Pete.”

“What do you mean, Jupe? Of course we will! I know you want to play the hero again and solve all the puzzles on your own, but in this case it won’t help at all! We have the money, and we know who the gangsters are.”

“Think about it, Pete... We have the money, but as long as there is no evidence of Calhoon’s counterfeiting operations, we can’t call the police on him. You want to alert Inspector Cotta based on Skinny’s allegations alone? I don’t think that’s a good idea. I think our own observations are far more pertinent. So we’ll be present at the meeting between Wagner and Calhoon.

“When it comes to the messed up business, they might give us one or two useful hints. Who knows, maybe the counterfeit money is even lying around in heaps on Calhoon’s coffee table... but we’ll just have to check that out first. Once we have the gangsters and the evidence in one place, we’ll notify the police. It’s as simple as that.”

Pete moaned. Of course Jupiter was right in what he said. Jupiter was almost always right. Still, Pete knew that it was a tricky business. But he would hardly be able to stop the First Investigator. Once Jupiter had set his mind to something, it was almost impossible to change it.

“And what about the money?” Pete finally asked. “At least we can take that to the police.”

“No way!” cried Skinny. “It’s mine! You promised I’d get it if I told you the truth, Jones!”

Jupiter shook his head slowly. “I merely said that you won’t get the money until you tell us in detail what’s going on... but to draw the reverse conclusion that you will get it if you give us the details is not entirely logical. I never made a promise like that.” Jupiter again saw his opponent speechless and smiled contentedly.

Bob giggled.

Pete innocently whistled a ditty.

And Skinny struck. His clenched fist hit Jupiter on the chin. The First Investigator staggered back and bumped into the bookshelf. Some books fell out, but Jupiter did not even notice that. Coloured stars danced before his eyes. He collapsed, but immediately Bob was with him and supported him. Jupiter’s mouth was numb. Dazed, he groped for his chin. His lower lip was bleeding.

The pain came with a few seconds delay, but it suddenly tore him back to reality—just in time to stop Pete from doing something stupid. The Second Investigator had already grabbed Skinny and pushed him against the door.

“Pete!” cried Jupiter. “Let him go!”

Pete did not respond.

“Pete!”

Reluctantly, the Second Investigator let Skinny go.

He grinned nastily. “You’re such cowards.”

“This has nothing to do with cowardice,” Jupiter contradicted and reached for a handkerchief to dab the blood from his lip. “But I reject any form of physical violence. The fact that you are only too quick to resort to this means of conflict resolution merely confirms my opinion of you... but it does not tempt me to indulge in similar barbaric patterns of behaviour.”

“You can talk all you want, fatso. From now on, we play by my rules, is that clear? You need me... for one simple reason—you have no idea where Calhoon’s house is. And I guarantee you, you won’t find out until tonight. And I’ll make sure that you can’t come after me if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t mind if you bust Calhoon and Wagner, on the contrary, it’s fine by me. But you can only do that with my help. And I want the money for that... and I want it now.”

“Do we look that stupid?” Bob asked. “You want us to pay two hundred thousand dollars for an address?”

“I have a little more for you than just an address. I’ve been to Calhoon’s place. I know that house. It’s impossible to get in there unless I help you. Besides, you are not paying two hundred thousand dollars for that, you are just giving me my money back!”

“And what guarantee do we have that you’ll tell us the truth?” Bob asked.

“You have to trust me.”

Bob laughed. “It’s like believing in the tooth fairy.”

Jupiter took the handkerchief from his mouth and said: “We’ll do it the other way around. You’ll get the money when it’s done. That gives us the assurance that you won’t betray us to Wagner and Calhoon.”

“Absolutely not! I need the money now!”

“Why?” asked Pete. “Do you want to leave for South America today? Don’t you think that’s a bit obvious?”

“Nonsense! I need the money because—”

“Yeah?”

“Because...” Skinny fell silent.

“Spit it out, Skinny!” Bob demanded. “You can’t shock us any more anyway. You’d better tell us.”

“Because I made a mistake!” it blurted out of Skinny. “There’s proof that I switched cases. Wagner and Calhoon just haven’t noticed it yet... but sooner or later, they’ll find out... and then it’ll be my turn. That’s why I got to lay some of the cash off on Zia... and I gotta do it tonight so that Wagner and Calhoon will discover it on her and stop looking for other evidence.”

Now The Three Investigators were speechless after all.

“Skinny, I don’t think mankind has ever produced such a cunning scumbag like you,” Pete finally said.

“Shut up, Crenshaw!”

Jupiter’s hand moved to his lower lip and flinched back again when he touched the fresh wound. Suddenly it seemed to him as if thinking was harder than usual.

“What is this evidence that incriminates you, Skinny?” he finally asked.

“None of your business.”

“It may seem that way in your eyes, but you’re gonna have to tell us anyway, or we won’t do business.”

Skinny pinched his mouth. It was obvious that he had no desire to tell The Three Investigators what his mistake had been... but he had no choice.

“The magazines,” he finally growled. “The magazines that I put in the briefcase, I got from my parents’ rubbish bin. They subscribed to them, and their name and address is printed on the top. I just remembered that today. So far, Calhoon hasn’t been looking at the magazines very closely, but if he finds it—”

Bob snorted away. As unamusing as the conversation with Skinny had been so far—now he just couldn’t help it. Pete joined in the laughter, while Jupiter was content to smile superiorly.

“Skinny, Skinny,” said the First Investigator, shaking his head. “With your staggering lack of intelligence, it’s a wonder that—”

“Save the rubbish, okay?” hissed Skinny. “I need to get the suspicion onto Zia before Calhoon gets the idea to check the magazines, and I need the money for that—today! Besides, Mike is threatening to blab on me to Calhoon if I don’t pay him his share by tomorrow at the latest. I’m really in a fix!”

“All right,” Jupiter said. “You’ll get part of the money now to fool Wagner and Calhoon, the rest after we get the operation off the ground.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Skinny asked.

“You don’t have a choice,” Jupiter said with a smile on his face.

“I do. We do it my way... We meet shortly before 8 pm. You bring the rest of the money in a briefcase. We hide it together in a secret place and chain it up. I alone have the key. After meeting Wagner and Calhoon, I’ll pick up the money. And no tricks from you!”

Jupiter frowned and finally nodded. “That sounds reasonable.”

“Are you crazy, Juve?” cried Pete. “You can’t let this freak have all the money!”

“Why not?” Jupiter countered. “He’ll go to South America and we’ll be rid of him forever! And we’ll get the gangsters anyway... That sounds like a reasonable deal.”

“That sounds like pure madness!” Pete remarked.

“For once I have to agree with Crenshaw,” said Skinny with a frown. “It’s not like you to give in so easily, Jones. You are up to something!”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “You think so? It is your idea with the briefcase. Otherwise, we can drop the whole plan. Then we’ll go straight to the police and you’ll get nothing. So what would you like?”

Skinny’s eyes narrowed to slits. “I warn you, Jones! No tricks! You won’t hand me over to the police, understand? It wouldn’t make any sense. I may have worked for Wagner, but firstly I never committed a crime, and secondly, I’d say I never knew what this was about. So just forget about it, okay?”

“Sure,” Juve replied calmly.

“And if I feel that something is going wrong tonight... that you’re trying to swindle me... that you’re setting me up... or that I won’t get the money... I’ll turn you in right away! Wagner and Calhoon will cut you to pieces—you can be sure of that! So stay back!”

Jupiter nodded. “It’s a deal.”

Skinny shook his head slowly. “I don’t trust you, Jones.”

“Me neither, Skinny,” Jupiter replied. “Shall we make the pact?”

“Okay,” Skinny said.

8. Operation Money Case

The copier whirred and spat out a piece of paper. Jupiter took it in his hand and looked at it closely. "That's more like it. I think that's what we should do." He showed the paper to his friends.

Bob looked critically into the eyes of Benjamin Franklin's copied face. "Well... it's a copy. It's hard to miss."

"But it's much better than the last attempts," Jupe remarked. "They were always too light or too dark."

"But it's still a copy," Bob said. "The back stays white."

"I guarantee you Skinny won't notice it," Jupiter said. "Because he won't have a chance to look at the contents of the briefcase. And there's enough for a superficial illusion in dim light."

Jupiter placed six one-hundred-dollar banknotes close together on the surface of the copier and let the machine run. The machine spat out a new sheet every few seconds.

"I don't know," muttered Pete. "I find far too many obscure and shaky things about Operation Money Case. Everything we're planning is based on Skinny's rubbish. But what do we do? We might run like fools into a trap."

"Nothing indicates that there is a trap," Jupiter tried to reassure the Second Investigator.

"No. But there's nothing to suggest that there isn't," Pete countered. "We know nothing about these people, about the house, about the whole situation... except what Skinny says... and we can't trust him!"

"We are not trusting him at all," Jupiter assured Pete and pointed to the copier. "As you can see..."

"Yeah, but... how can we work with someone we don't trust?" Pete asked. "This... this isn't working out. And I guarantee you that Skinny feels the same way. He will have some unpleasant surprises in store that we don't expect."

Bob nodded thoughtfully. "You got a point there, Pete. I have a bad feeling about this too. Skinny hates us. He can get us in a lot of trouble if he wants to."

"What Skinny wants... is his money," Jupiter said emphatically. "That is his top priority. The desire for revenge comes second for him. So what does he gain by giving us false information? Then the whole operation fails and he goes away empty-handed. Until he has the money, everything will go according to plan."

"How can you be so sure?" the Second Investigator asked.

"It's perfectly logical," Jupe replied.

"Logical, huh?" Pete said. "About as logical as a computer game, right? Jupe, you can't counter Skinny with logic. That guy is unpredictable!"

"I do not understand your scepticism," Jupiter said. "Skinny can never hold a candle to us... and you know as well as I do that he is gonna mess up along the way. We're going to expose Calhoon's counterfeit trade and get Skinny. That's perfect."

"If you ask me, it's pure recklessness," mumbled Pete.

Jupiter shook his head. "We are smarter than him. If he's up to something, we'll know it immediately."

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

Pete sighed and remained silent for a while. Then he said: “All right. It’s all about trust, isn’t it? If we’re not gonna trust Skinny, we should at least trust each other. Believe it or not, Jupe, I trust you. You’ve always had an ace up your sleeve that we don’t know about—an ingenious plan that covers all eventualities. Please just tell me this is going to be the case this time so I would feel better.”

“I... uh, sure. I am prepared for anything. I’m ready for anything.” Jupiter nodded to confirm, but in actual fact, he felt miserable... That’s because he had no ace up his sleeve. It was also not clear to him that he would need one in this case.

To Jupe, the thing was quite simple—they would enter Calhoon’s house, search for evidence of the counterfeit money, disappear again and notify the police. What Skinny was up to didn’t matter. All he’d get was a stack of copied notes. The plan was so simple it could only work. What could go wrong?

It was not far to the agreed meeting point. It was located between Rocky Beach and Santa Monica in an industrial park that was as good as extinct at that time. Behind high lattice fences, large grey warehouses and concrete office buildings lined up close together. Only a few lights were switched on behind the windows.

Pete slowly drove past the company signs to find the spice factory where they had arranged to meet. Then he saw Skinny’s blue sports car, which was clearly visible under a street lamp. Skinny wore a light suit and leaned casually against the door. Despite the darkness, he wore sunglasses.

“If I can see how he’s standing,” growled the Second Investigator. “Mr Big-Shot-of-the-Year. Utterly disgusting.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Pete, but tactically, it would be wiser not to let Skinny know your rejection too early.”

Pete parked right behind the sports car and The Three Investigators got out. The air smelled unpleasantly hot and artificial.

“Come along,” said Skinny instead of a greeting, left his post and stepped out of the light of the street lamp into darkness. A little further on, there was an inconspicuous door in the fence that separated the street from the area of the spice factory, where the unpleasant smell emanated.

Skinny opened the door and entered the overgrown area behind it, in the middle of which stood a dilapidated, former factory building. They walked towards it. Finally, Skinny stopped in front of a weathered scaffold whose former purpose was not apparent.

“Now, listen up...” Skinny said. “We only got one deal, all right? You get Wagner and Calhoon, I get the cash. And no tricks! Now, is the money in the case?”

“Quite right,” Jupiter replied and put the aluminium briefcase, which he had found at the salvage yard, on the ground. He undid the latches and opened the lid. As Skinny had expected, the briefcase contained neatly bundled banknotes, the likeness of Benjamin Franklin shining in his face. Greedily he reached for it.

Jupiter closed the lid and missed Skinny’s finger only by a hair’s breadth.

“Are you crazy, man?” Skinny snapped.

“Not at all,” Jupiter said. “The money won’t be available until the operation is complete.” He took a thick, heavy steel chain from his backpack and wrapped it tightly around the case several times. It was now impossible to open it. “I suppose you intend to use this scaffolding

to chain the briefcase tightly.” Jupiter lashed the chain around the metal frame until finally the briefcase could not be moved. Then he pulled out a huge padlock and pushed the handle into two chain links.

But suddenly Skinny held his arm. “What are you doing, fatso?”

“What am I doing?” Jupiter answered. “I’m chaining up the case... or do you want every random homeless person passing by to take it? Isn’t that what we agreed? I’ll give you the key to the lock and you can pick up the briefcase later.”

Skinny smiled. “And I’m supposed to fall for that? How stupid do you think I am, Jones? Do you think I don’t know that you are trying to set me up? Do you think I don’t know that you have a second key to take the money yourself?”

Jupiter shook his head. “If you had even a hint of knowledge of human nature, not only could you avoid falling for dubious contemporaries who operate beyond the boundaries of legality, but you would also know that such profit-oriented goals were and still are alien to us.”

“I’ve got enough insight into human nature to know that you’re just trying to distract me from the fact that I’ve got you figured out. So...” Skinny pulled something out of his pocket. “I brought this...” In his hand was a brand-new, state-of-the-art, cut-proof, pick-proof padlock that flashed in the moonlight. “There’s only one key for this... and I’ve got it.”

Jupiter took a step aside. “Here you go. Whatever you say. We’ll just use your lock.”

“Wait a minute!” Pete interfered. “If Skinny has the key to the money, he could blab on us to Calhoon and still run. It won’t work!”

“If I do that,” Skinny replied, “then you’ll blab on me to Wagner, and then I’m done. So I will keep my mouth shut... and so will you. We got a deal, remember?”

“No, Skinny. We haven’t forgotten,” Juve assured him. “We’ll do as agreed.”

“There you go,” said Skinny with a grin and let his lock snap shut. He sank the key deep into his trouser pocket. “Let’s go.”

From the spice factory, Skinny drove in his sports car to Calhoon’s house. The Three Investigators followed behind in Pete’s MG.

Calhoon’s house was different than what The Three Investigators had expected. It was not an old mansion in a Spanish style as was often found in California. There were no columned entrance, no balcony and no well-kept flower bed on the driveway. Instead, the house was a modern block of steel, no more than a simple cube which was irritatingly simple.

There were countless small, narrow windows. None of them were rectangular. And all were at a different height. They pierced the shiny steel façade like bullet holes from cannonballs. There was a garden with a few trees, but the lawn did not reach the house. There was a ring of asphalt around the building. Bright spotlights lit up the property and robbed it of its last bit of colour with the glaring light.

Calhoon’s house looked like a black and white photograph, except for the red Plymouth parked in front of the building. Next to it was a silver Lincoln, which in its simple colour scheme again fitted perfectly into the overall picture.

“Nasty,” said Pete, as they looked at the house from the street through the bars of the three-metre-high steel fence. “Who would want to live in something like that? It looks like a maximum security prison!”

“Your comparison is quite accurate, Pete,” Bob thought. “That thing is so brightly lit that no one will dare break in. The question is, how do we get in?”

The Three Investigators looked at Skinny.

"I'm about to ring the bell," Skinny said. "Mr Wagner and Beaumont are already here, so I can go to the toilet right away without being inconvenienced. There I open the window. It's on the ground floor. You can get in there."

"If you now tell us which of the countless windows it is, that would be very helpful," Pete replied snappily.

"The one that I'll open later," Skinny replied no less biting. "The one on the right."

"Fine," Bob said. "Then what happens next? If the house is as plain inside as it is outside, they'll spot us immediately."

But Skinny shook his head. "Inside, everything is very different, you'll see. There are a few small stairs. Try to get to the top. There's a gallery from which you can watch everything. But let's get one thing straight—you do nothing while I'm still in the house, understand? I don't want to be questioned by the police. I'm not gonna stay in there long." Skinny sneered sneakily. "The suspicion will soon fall on someone else, and then I'll leave. After that, you can do what you want and we're even. You got that?"

"Sure," Jupiter replied.

"One more thing—don't stay in the garden too long as you might be discovered. If something goes wrong and you can't get into the house, you'd better go away."

"What could go wrong, Skinny?" Pete asked lurking.

"Nothing. I'm just saying in case of emergency, don't stay in the garden. They'll see you better than you think."

"How are we gonna get out of the property if the gate is locked?" Pete asked.

"Go hide somewhere until the gate opens, I don't know," Skinny said. "You figure it out, you great detectives... And if you do get caught, that's your problem. Don't you dare bring me into this, all right? One word from you and I'll kill you."

"Okay," Jupiter said. "But that only applies as long as you don't make sure that we get caught. If you do, Skinny Norris, and if I should have the slightest suspicion that you betrayed us, Wagner and Calhoon will know the truth. And I warn you—I can be very persuasive. Let me assure you that when in doubt, they will believe me over you."

Skinny nodded. "You have nothing to fear from me." He took one look at his watch. "I've got to go. Wagner hates tardiness. So then... we won't see each other again. Tomorrow, when it's all over, I'll be on a plane. Rocky Beach is yours. Make it work."

Jupiter almost smiled. But he could barely contain himself. Instead, he nodded to Skinny in silence.

Skinny pressed a bell button at the gate. Shortly afterwards, he said his name into the intercom and the electronic lock opened with a buzz.

As Skinny walked through the gate, The Three Investigators ducked close behind him and slipped past the gate. They immediately ran off into the less brightly lit garden, while Skinny hurriedly walked towards the house. The three of them watched as he was let in at the door, which was barely visible in the uniform façade. They waited a moment longer, then they left their cover.

"Okay," Jupiter said. "Now it's our turn."

9. Jupiter is Stuck

“This is the most delicate moment of the operation,” gasped Jupiter as they ran towards the brightly lit building. “At any moment... anyone... looking out the window... can see us.”

“You don’t say, Jupe,” Bob moaned. “You’d better hurry up instead of telling us the obvious!”

The path across the asphalt square illuminated by the spotlights seemed endless, and at any moment The Three Investigators expected an alarm to go off, a dog to bark or Calhoon to appear before them.

But nothing happened. Finally, they reached the right side of the house. Here they were in relative safety. They could not be seen from the house now, but for someone coming from the street to the house, they were still in the limelight. They hurriedly searched the front of the house for an open window. There was none.

“Darn,” cursed Pete. “Skinny’s playing us out! I told you so.”

“Don’t panic, Pete!” Jupiter said. “He’ll be here.”

“What if someone sees us now? If—” A noise silenced Pete.

A window opened. Someone whistled a happy song. Then the whistling became quieter, a door slammed shut and the light behind the window went out.

“You see, Pete, everything is going according to plan,” Jupiter whispered.

“Yes,” growled the Second Investigator. “Still... but I see the next problem.”

“Which is?” Jupe asked.

“How do we get in?” Pete pointed to the window. It was narrow and triangular and was two metres from the ground level.

“You’re asking us that?” Bob asked. “You’re the athlete here.”

“Okay, let me ask you another way—how would you get in there? Or, to put it more clearly, how would Jupe get in there?”

The First Investigator swallowed. “That is, however, a fair question.”

“Jupe, when will you finally work on your physical condition?” Pete asked.

“I do that every day,” Jupiter claimed, “with chips and chocolate.”

“Very funny. All right, guys, we don’t have all night. I suggest I climb in first, then Jupe comes in. Bob pushes, I pull, that should do it. Finally, you come up, Bob.”

“All right,” Jupiter said.

For Pete, the whole action was a piece of cake. He jumped, grabbed the lower edge of the window and pulled himself up in one flowing movement. Like a contortionist, he wound through the narrow opening, rolled over and landed safely on the other side.

The bathroom was dark. There was just a little light coming from under the door. It was just enough to see that the bathroom was very large. Pete hesitated for a moment. Should he turn on the light? He’d better not. But what did he do if someone came? On the spur of the moment, Pete scurried to the door and locked it. Now he felt at least a little safer. Then he returned to the window.

“The coast is clear! Now you, Jupe.”

Jupiter placed his right foot in Bob’s crossed hands and pushed off. Bob groaned under the weight of the First Investigator, but finally he had lifted him so far up that Jupiter was up

to the middle of his chest in the window.

“And now?” moaned the First Investigator.

“Now you can just come in,” Pete said and pulled Jupiter’s arms.

“Aaaah! Ow!”

“Geez, Jupe!” hissed Pete. “Do you want to attract attention from the whole place?”

“Stop pulling, Pete! You’re gonna pull my arms off!”

“Well, then just come in by yourself!”

“It’s my stomach!” Jupiter pressed and his face slowly turned red. “I’m stuck!”

“You’re not serious, Jupe.”

“Yes, I am. I can’t get in.”

“What’s going on up there?” Bob asked from outside.

“I said I can’t get in,” Jupiter hissed.

“What? I can’t understand you up here, Jupe. Your stomach is clogging up the whole window!”

“How can you build such idiotically tiny windows!” exploded the First Investigator. He gasped. “The architect who designed this junk building should be arrested immediately! I... I... I...”

“What?” Pete asked.

“I’ll have to go back down!” Jupiter pushed himself off and slid backwards out of the opening. Like a wet sack, he fell to the ground. Panting, he remained seated for a moment.

“Oh, boy,” Bob said. “Jupe, this is really—”

“Any comment is superfluous in light of my already humiliating situation, Bob. I can’t do it. Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”

“What do you mean you can’t do it?” Bob asked.

“You two must enter the house without me. I’m staying out here... to keep a lookout, in case something goes wrong.”

“What do you mean by something going wrong, Jupe?” Pete asked anxiously from above.

“Nothing. I mean just to be sure.”

“Can’t you get in through another window?” Bob suggested.

“Look around you. None of them are any bigger. And most of them are much higher than this. Come on, fellas! All you have to do is keep your eyes and ears open. You can do that without me. Then you have to alert Cotta... but not until you have proof of Calhoon’s counterfeiting—absolutely not before!”

“Right, boss,” Pete said. “Come on, Bob! There’s no time to lose!”

Bob nodded and made himself ready to climb. Then he remembered something else. “I have an idea, Jupe. We’re going to try to get to the front door and let you in. If it doesn’t work, we’re out of luck. But it’s worth a try...”

“Okay,” Jupiter agreed. “I’ll give you five minutes to open the front door. If you haven’t made it by then, I’ll leave the premises.”

Bob nodded. “It’s better. Remember Skinny’s warning.” Then he jumped up to the window. He was not quite as sporty as Pete, but with the help of his friends he too made it into the bathroom.

Jupiter nodded at him once more to cheer him up, then he hurried over the brightly lit square back to the garden.

Bob closed the window. “Here we are...”

“In the lion’s den,” Pete said in a grave voice. “We’d better hurry. We don’t want to miss the most important thing.”

The Second Investigator was heading for the door when suddenly he heard footsteps. "Someone's coming," he whispered, pausing in mid-motion.

The steps approached the door, slowed down, and finally stopped right in front of it. Pete gave Bob a panicked look. A hiding place! They needed a hiding place! But here, it was pitch dark. How could they...

Suddenly, the ceiling light came on and blinded the two detectives. And then someone pushed the door handle down. The door remained closed. Someone jiggled it. Nothing happened. Sure! Pete had locked it!

And then they heard Mr Wagner's booming bass voice. "Hello? Is anybody in there?"

Bob and Pete did not even dare to breathe. What could they do now?

"Hello?" Another jiggle. Then Mr Wagner took a few steps away from the door and shouted: "Hey! Calhoon! I think your bathroom door is locked!"

"No, it's just a little stuck," the answer came from further away.

Bob had a brainstorm. There were only two possibilities—either they escaped through the window and forego the mission, or...

He grabbed Pete by the sleeve and dragged him into the shower cubicle.

"What—"

"Shh!" Bob sneaked to the door and unlocked it. Steps were already approaching on the other side. Bob scurried back, squeezed himself into the shower cubicle with Pete and drew the shower curtain across.

"Just stuck?" muttered Wagner barely audible. "What nonsense!"

Then the door flew open and slammed into the wall. "What is it..." Wagner started, then stopped.

Pete and Bob held their breath. Did Wagner see them through the frosted glass? Did he suspect anything? They watched the shapeless shadow behind the glass with fascination... pausing outside the toilet. Then he wandered over to the sink and washed his hands. And finally, he left the bathroom muttering.

The light went out. The two detectives breathed a sigh of relief. It was only now that Bob realized that he hadn't actually been breathing all that time. His heart was racing. And Pete had sweaty hands.

"That was—" Pete began.

"—Close," Bob said. "Indeed. But now my body's so full of adrenaline, it can hardly get any worse. Let's see if we can get Jupe and his overweight body into this place!"

They left the shower cubicle, crept to the door and opened it silently. The bathroom was at the end of a long, brightly lit corridor. The floor and walls were made of white concrete, but their sneakers did not make a sound. The bright light, however, irritated Bob and Pete enormously.

At the end of the corridor, there was a bend to the right. From there, voices came to them. Bob peeked around the corner. Behind it was a huge room, about six metres high. It had to fill almost the entire area of the house and it shone with unnatural brightness.

Everywhere there were small projections on the walls on which lamps, books or works of art were placed. Pedestals rose from the concrete floor and divided the huge hall into smaller segments, as if someone had constructed the house out of gigantic Lego bricks and aimlessly used the last bricks for the interior decoration.

There was a kitchen here, a bar or a TV corner there, but all living areas were open and connected. Stairs led to a gallery that spanned the room in a U-shape halfway up. Other steps ended in nothing and were only for decoration.

Everything here was white and was illuminated by strong halogen lamps, which hung from an artistically branched pole in the room. Only the few modern oil paintings, which dangled from the ceiling on wire ropes, gave the hall a little colour.

Even the wickedly expensive-looking designer furniture was white. Right in the middle of this confusing architecture were monstrous white leather sofas and armchairs draped on an equally monstrous white fabric.

Mr Wagner was sitting there. Beaumont and Skinny stood next to him and sank almost ankle-deep in the fluffiness of the carpet. All three had a glass in their hands. But while Wagner and Beaumont casually sipped their drinks, Skinny seemed to cling to his—which Bob was not surprised, for the three of them were facing a veritable giant of a man.

Calhoon even surpassed Beaumont by a considerable margin. He was bald and wore a snow-white suit that fit perfectly. Even from a distance, Bob could still see the bright light green of his eyes. There was a frightening calm in his gaze.

“How much longer shall we wait, Calhoon?” Wagner asked nervously.

“Until Zia gets here.” Calhoon’s voice was calm and icy. And with that one sentence, he cleared all the air and made one thing very certain—he was the man of the house; he set the boundaries; and he made all the rules. Anyone who wasn’t willing to play by those rules was an enemy. There was not the slightest doubt about that.

He radiated all this with every fibre of his body, and Bob involuntarily felt fear. Suddenly he realized why Skinny had such respect for Calhoon. This man was in control. As long as it went according to his wishes, everything was fine. However, should he ever lose control... Bob did not want to think about what would happen then.

Wagner was also clear who he had before him. The corner of his mouth twitched, but he remained silent and turned back to his drink.

Bob focused on their mission. He searched the room for the best way to get to the gallery, as Skinny had recommended.

Close to them, a staircase led up. Behind the railing, no one would see them. But the way up there was as brightly lit as the rest of the room. There was almost no way to reach the stairs unnoticed. It was the same with the front door. It led directly into this room. It was impossible to bring Jupe into the house in this way. Bob had seen enough. He stepped back and turned to Pete.

“How does it look?” whispered the Second Investigator.

“Hopeless,” Bob replied and whispered the situation to him. “We can forget about Jupe. We won’t get to the stairs either. There’s no cover.”

“We can eavesdrop on them from here,” said Pete.

“And the next time someone goes to the bathroom, we’ll be discovered,” Bob said. “Forget it.”

“Let me have a go,” Pete asked and took a look around the corner himself.

At this very moment, Skinny turned his head and looked Pete straight in the eyes. The Second Investigator flinched. He was careless! If it hadn’t been Skinny, but one of the others...

“Say, Mr Calhoon,” Skinny suddenly said, and Pete felt as if he was speaking louder than necessary. “That picture there—where did you get it?”

For a moment, there was a consternated silence.

“If you want to force a conversation on me because you can’t stand the silence, maybe you’d better wait outside, boy,” Calhoon finally said calmly.

“No, sir, I really mean it. I’m interested in art, you know, and this painting—”

Calhoon laughed resoundingly. “You interested in art? Wagner, what kind of a guy do you have here?”

“Shut up, Skinny,” growled Wagner.

“No,” said Calhoon. “No, let him talk, Wagner. I find him amusing.”

It suddenly dawned on Bob, who had listened to the conversation as irritated as Pete. Skinny tried to distract the others! Bob pushed himself past Pete and looked around the corner. In fact, they all stared at the painting hanging on the opposite wall. The question was how long they stared. The two of them had to take the opportunity.

It’s now or never!

10. In a Tight Spot

Bob acted without thinking. He grabbed Pete and pulled him along. The Second Investigator was far too horrified to resist.

They stepped into the huge hall, into the middle of the glaring brightness. For a moment, they were visible from almost every point in the room. It was exactly the moment when nobody was looking in their direction. Stunned by his own recklessness, Bob scurried up the stairs and ducked behind the railing. While Skinny made a fool of himself in front of the rest, the two detectives hurried up on all fours.

On the gallery, there was a corner where no spotlight was directed at and which was in relative darkness. They ducked and rushed towards it and took cover behind the concrete railing. Bob's heartbeat almost hurt in his chest, and he wiped his sweaty hands on his pants. It was only now that he was able to have a clear thought again. That was absolutely madness! But it had worked... and Bob realized that they owed it all to Skinny.

"Your interest in art doesn't seem too far off, kid, if you don't even know the painter Ed Stingwood."

"I... uh, well," Skinny stammered. "I've heard about him before, of course, but—"

"Enough!" hissed Mr Wagner softly. "What's going on here? Are you trying to make fools of us, Calhoon? What is this art talk about? I want to know what's going on with the money now!"

"Excuse me, Mr Wagner," Calhoon calmly replied. "But your lackey was the one who started the art talk... not me. We're just waiting for Zia."

Now Wagner became louder. "What for? What game are you playing here? Why don't you tell me what's going on? I'm... I'm going crazy!"

Calhoon sighed, and for the first time there was a hint of anger hidden deep within him. It was enough to put everyone present on alert. "As you wish, Wagner. So before you leave any more fear-sweat stains on my sofa, let's start without Zia... What about the money, you want to know? Well, I didn't get it... but I think you already know that."

Wagner puffed up a little more. "But you must have got it!"

Slowly Calhoon shook his head. "All I got was this briefcase." He bent down to the brown briefcase that had been standing next to an armchair and lifted it onto the table right in front of Wagner's nose. He opened it and let Wagner look inside.

Skinny turned pale.

"Magazines," Wagner said. "So what? That proves nothing. Somebody else could've put them there."

"Who?" Calhoon asked lurking. "You mean me? Are you calling me a liar, Wagner?"

"Then are you saying I am, Calhoon?" Wagner argued. "I had the money! It was in that briefcase!"

"I don't really care what was in that case. The fact is, you got the goods... and I came away empty-handed."

"It was in there," Wagner insisted, laboriously dominated. "If the money has not reached you, then... then..."

"Then Zia must have stolen it?" Calhoon helped him out.

“Yes!” Wagner said.

“Or Skinny?” Calhoon asked.

“Wait a minute,” Skinny interfered. “I...”

“Shut up, Skinny!” hissed Wagner.

“Now I’m the fool?” Skinny defended himself. “You said yourself that Beaumont watched me make the drop! So I can’t have taken the money at all—”

“I said shut up, Skinny!” Wagner yelled.

Calhoon laughed. It was the superior laugh of a man who knew exactly what he was doing, who had anticipated this conversation in every detail, and who was not the least bit afraid of Wagner and Beaumont. “You’re so easy to read, Wagner, it almost hurts.”

Wagner swallowed and wiped his sweaty forehead. His toupée slipped a little and he looked pathetic. “What... what do you mean?”

“Answer me one question... Why didn’t you bring me the money personally? Why this ridiculous handover? Were you trying to impress me with your new little slave?”

“I... don’t understand what...” Wagner stammered.

“Then I will explain it to you, Wagner,” Calhoon said. “The handover had only one purpose. You needed someone to blame if the money did not reach me... and who better than your newly recruited lackey—Skinny the scapegoat, who was supposed to absolve you of any blame. But I must disappoint you, Wagner... I won’t fall for your clumsy tricks. You’ll pay me, Wagner—the whole two hundred thousand dollars.”

Wagner jumped up so quickly that half of his drink spilled out of the glass and left an ugly stain on the snow-white carpet. The toupée slipped once more. His face was bright red, and sweat ran down his forehead. “You... you can’t do this!”

“The entire two hundred thousand dollars plus the cost of cleaning the carpet that you just ruined... and I want it tonight. If I don’t have the money before sunrise, you’ll regret it.”

Calhoon reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun—an impressive weapon with a long barrel and a bright shimmering mother-of-pearl grip.

Jupiter was waiting—for hours, it seemed to him. Yet his watch claimed that he had only been staring at the front door of Calhoon’s house for ten minutes.

Five minutes had been allotted. After that, he was to leave the property, as Skinny had warned them not to stay in the garden any longer than necessary. But on the other hand, what could happen to him out here? If someone came, he could still run away and hide somewhere.

He was much more concerned about Pete and Bob. Since the two had disappeared into the interior of the house, Jupiter had the feeling that there were huge gaps in the supposedly simple plan where nothing could go wrong. The longer he thought about it, the clearer he became that practically everything could go wrong. They could be discovered. Skinny could have a plan that went far beyond what Jupiter had imagined... or maybe the house was full of gangsters of the worst kind.

There were so many horrible possibilities. What was it that made him, the First Investigator, so reckless in planning such a daring venture? Of course he trusted Bob and Pete completely, but when the going got tough, they were on their own.

Jupiter couldn’t do anything from out here. At that moment, he would have given anything to be with his friends in the lion’s den—not because he liked to put himself in danger, but because he felt that they were only really good together.

Effective, strong, on his own, Juve’s self-confidence fizzled out. That’s why he stared at the door longer than he had expected, hoping that Pete or Bob could let him in.

While Jupiter tormented himself with self-doubt and reproaches and waited for a signal from inside the house, he made a decision—he would call Inspector Cotta. Wagner and Calhoon might slip through their fingers for lack of evidence, but that was still better than all the catastrophes he had just imagined.

Again he looked at his watch. Five minutes. He would wait another five minutes. If nothing happened...

Suddenly, a sound alerted him. Something cracked. He turned around. Behind him were a few trees in loose groups. Maybe a branch broke off somewhere, or some small animal was scurrying. But if it was something else...

Crack! That noise again. Jupiter paused. Something rustled. And suddenly there were footsteps—right behind him. Jupiter turned around—and looked into the barrel of a gun.

So there it was, the catastrophe Jupiter had been waiting for.

“This... this is all a very stupid misunderstanding,” stuttered Wagner. “I can’t explain it, but...”

“There’s not much to explain,” Calhoon said coldly.

“Bob!” whispered Pete. “I think it’s time to leave!”

“But we haven’t found out anything yet!” Bob whispered back.

“We found out that Mr Calhoon likes to wave a gun around,” Pete replied. “That’s good enough for me, frankly.”

Bob nodded. Basically, he saw the same thing. “But if we try to go back through the window now, we’ll be discovered for sure! Skinny will not be able to distract the three of them again. He has other worries right now. We have to wait for a more favourable moment, Pete. We’ll be stuck here until then.” Bob turned his attention again to what was going on down the hall.

Mr Wagner sweated as he looked into the barrel of the gun. He thought about his options, but it was obvious that he had none.

No one doubted that Calhoon meant what he said. He wanted the money... and he was convinced that Wagner had set him up. So what was he supposed to do?

Only Skinny knew the truth. He was the only one who could save Wagner. But he wouldn’t do it, Bob was absolutely sure. Skinny would never help another human as long as he was safe.

Suddenly, Wagner’s gaze cleared. “The briefcase!” he shouted. “Have you examined the case yet? Perhaps we can find some clue there as to what happened to the money.”

“Do you think this foolish attempt will save you?” Calhoon sneered.

But Wagner didn’t pay any attention to him at all, but immediately threw himself on the briefcase with the magazines.

Skinny went white as a ghost. “I...” he started and stopped.

Wagner burrowed in the magazines. He scanned the lining of the briefcase. Turned it over. Closed the lid shut and lifted it up.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Wagner,” growled Calhoon indignantly. “Do you think this will get you anywhere?”

But Wagner did not pay any attention to him at all. Desperation made him keep on searching. Suddenly, he stopped.

“What is this?”

Bob closed his eyes. Wagner had just seen Skinny’s parents’ name on the magazines. This was the way it had to be! Now it was all over. They would grind Skinny alive, and he

could betray The Three Investigators!

“Bob!” hissed Pete. “We must do something now! We must—”

“That scribble there!” Wagner burst out. “There, on the lining of the lid! It wasn’t here before. That’s not the case I gave Skinny!”

“What are you talking about?” growled Calhoon angrily. “Your whining for mercy and your desperate attempts to lead me astray are pathetic!”

“No, really! The briefcase has been exchanged! I don’t remember this scrawl! Wait, it says—” This was as far as he got, because at that moment, a metallic click sounded and the front door opened.

A tall, slim woman came in. Pete gasped. She was wearing a skin-tight suit made of a white, strangely shimmering material—somewhere between lacquer and neoprene, Pete surmised. Anyway, it was tight. Her black hair was tied back tightly and fell over a black backpack decorated with bizarre looking rubber spikes.

In addition, blue sunglasses that were so bright that you could also wear them at night. Zia was the perfect blend of Lara Croft and a character from the *Matrix* movies. She was stunning and dangerous.

Then Pete’s heart almost stopped. At the last second, he suppressed a sound of horror... but probably nobody would have heard him at that moment anyway because immediately, there was movement in all those present.

Skinny got even paler. Wagner let go of the briefcase and looked irritated in Zia’s direction.

And Calhoon lost his temper for a few seconds. “Zia! Who is that?”

In her left hand, Zia was holding a gun. With her right hand, she dragged Jupiter Jones into the hall.

11. A Child's Handwriting

When Jupiter entered the Calhoon house, he tried to get an idea of the situation as fast as he could.

The tension that prevailed between those present was almost tangible. Wagner looked as if his wife and child had just been taken from him. And this giant with the bright green piercing eyes must be Calhoon. The fact that he was holding a gun in his hand did not make Jupiter very confident. Whatever had just happened here, Jupiter had apparently burst into the middle of an argument.

What about Pete and Bob? The interior of the house offered a variety of hiding places due to its winding architecture. This meant that the two of them were probably close by watching everything. Good. So he didn't have to worry about them for the time being.

Jupiter's gaze hit Skinny's. His arch-enemy stared at him like a ghost. It was clear what Skinny thought at that moment—that Jupiter wanted to expose him. But that was not the intention of the First Investigator.

"Who is this? I'd like to know that too," Zia replied to Calhoon's question and threw her spiked backpack on the sofa. "This fellow was prowling around your property."

"How so?" Calhoon said. "The gate's closed!"

"It is. I have no idea how he came in." Zia eyed Jupiter disparagingly. "He certainly didn't climb."

"Who are you?" Calhoon now turned directly to Jupiter.

The First Investigator tried to make as simple an impression as possible—a role he knew so well. In a monotone voice he stammered: "Please don't hurt me, sir! I... I just wanted to see if... if..."

"If what?" Calhoon snapped.

"I wonder if my frisbee landed in your yard," Jupiter lied.

"Are you kidding me, kid?" Calhoon asked.

"He's probably just a little burglar," Skinny interfered—and Jupiter almost nodded. That was exactly what he wanted Calhoon to believe.

"A little burglar, huh? An underage, overweight kid trying to break in here?" Again Calhoon turned to Jupiter. "You're not a burglar. And you certainly didn't lose your frisbee at this time of the night. Who are you?"

When Jupiter did not answer, Calhoon turned to Zia and ordered: "Search him!"

Zia grabbed the First Investigator with an iron grip. In no time at all, she searched all his pockets. She found his house key, his wallet—and the small silver card holder in which he now kept The Three Investigators' business cards. Curious, Zia opened the card holder and pulled out a card. She cast a sceptical glance at it and then passed it wordlessly to Calhoon.

The card said:



“What’s this supposed to mean?” Calhoon asked. Jupiter still did not answer.

In the meantime, Zia had found his ID as well. “This fellow here is Jupiter Jones. He lives in Rocky Beach.”

“Jupiter Jones?” Mr Wagner cried and was suddenly even more excited than before. “Did you say Jupiter Jones?”

Zia frowned. “That’s what I said. Do you know him?”

Wagner shook his head. “No. But his name... Look!” He pointed to the briefcase—more precisely, to the lining of the lid.

Calhoon bent over and took a look. “Indeed. It is written here ‘Jupiter Jones’—in a pale blue child’s handwriting.” He took a step towards Jupiter and looked at him suspiciously from top to bottom. “What is going on?”

At that very moment, something struck the First Investigator. It became clear to him why the briefcase that Skinny had thrown over the salvage yard fence had looked so familiar to him from the very first moment—because an almost identical briefcase once belonged to him!

The briefcase that Skinny had used for the exchange and which was now on the table in front of Jupiter had once been his. He had received it seven years ago as a gift from Aunt Mathilda for a school trip lasting several days. Jupiter had been incredibly proud and had immediately written his name on the lining of the briefcase lid himself. Years later, the good piece had ended up in the salvage yard.

The further connections were clear. In search of a briefcase that resembled Wagner’s, Skinny or someone he assigned had probably rummaged through The Jones Salvage Yard and bought this very briefcase which nobody wanted for years... and that became Jupiter’s undoing.

“I want to know what is going on,” Calhoon repeated, and his voice was little more than a hoarse whisper.

Jupiter swallowed. He blacked out, and he had not the slightest idea what he should do now. “I... I don’t know.”

“This boy has the money!” Wagner cried and nodded eagerly. “He stole it! It’s obvious! His name, this briefcase... He took the money!”

“Wagner!” cried Calhoon indignantly. “What nonsense are you talking? This idea lacks any logic, and if you would think about it for five seconds, you would know that too!”

“Really? And how can you explain to me why ‘Jupiter Jones’ is on the lid of the briefcase and the same Jupiter Jones is roaming around your property?”

“I’d like to know that too,” Calhoon said. “So, kid, what are you doing here?”

Jupiter wondered feverishly. He wouldn’t be able to keep his silence for long... and he had the sure feeling that sooner or later, Calhoon would become violent in order to make him talk.

He had to tell Calhoon something—perhaps to buy some time... until Pete and Bob called the police.

12. A Devious Attempt

While Jupiter made every effort to hide his fear of Calhoon, Bob and Pete broke out in a sweat in their hiding place.

“We must do something,” whispered Pete. “I’ll call Inspector Cotta now.”

“No!” hissed Bob. “No police! We still have no evidence of the counterfeit money trade!”

“Evidence? This is about Juve’s life! I honestly don’t care about anything else!”

But Bob remained steadfast. “Think about it, Pete. If we send the police after Calhoon, but they don’t find anything incriminating—then we’ll have him on our necks! Do you think he will just forget about us? With Calhoon on the loose, we won’t have a moment’s peace! He will make our lives a living hell! So we have to make sure that the police take him away!”

“And what about deprivation of liberty?” Pete whispered and pointed to Jupiter.

“Calhoon will claim that he was only holding a burglar... and he’s right about that,” Bob said.

Before the Second Investigator could reply, his attention was distracted. While Wagner and Calhoon were interrogating Jupiter to try to get something out of him, Skinny moved away from the small group unnoticed.

“Bob! Look what Skinny’s doing!”

Skinny sneaked away. Reached into his jacket and pulled out a brown envelope.

“The money,” Bob whispered. “Sure, he said he was going to plant the money on Zia to throw suspicion on her.”

“And how will he do that?” Pete asked. “Is he going to stick it down her throat? Or do you see any other possible place on her tight, white, shiny piece of lacquer? There’s not even enough room for a match, let alone an envelope full of money! I mean, if you’re wearing one of these, you probably never need money... or what do you think—”

“Pete! Could you perhaps take your eyes off from this lady and turn your attention back to Skinny? Then you’ll see what he’s up to.”

Skinny approached the sofa on which Zia’s black rubber-spiked backpack was lying. He took another look at the others, then he grabbed it and tampered with the fastener with flying fingers. Finally, he sank the envelope into the backpack and...

“Hey!” Zia called out.

Skinny dropped the backpack like a ticking bomb... but of course it was too late. Zia had caught him in the act. “Hey, what are you doing with my backpack?”

Now Wagner, Beaumont and Calhoon also turned to Skinny.

“I... I...” he stammered.

With quick steps, Zia approached Skinny. Furious, she grabbed her backpack and took a look inside. Then she pulled out the brown envelope and held it triumphantly in the air.

“What have we here?” she asked.

Curious, Calhoon took the envelope from her hand and opened it. A bundle of money came out. Calhoon weighed it in his hand, flipped through the banknotes and finally said: “I’m betting that this is twenty thousand dollars.”

“That’s what I thought!” Skinny hissed and gave Zia a hateful look. “I had a funny feeling about her from the start. Mr Calhoon, I think that answers the question about where your money is.”

For a very long moment, there was absolute silence. Wagner, Calhoon, Zia, Beaumont, Jupiter, Pete and Bob—they all stared at Skinny speechlessly.

Then Calhoon broke out into a roar of laughter. He laughed and laughed until even in their hiding place, Bob and Pete became afraid and anxious.

“This is really getting better and better tonight!” Calhoon burst out. “You... you mean to tell me that Zia stole the money?”

“After all, I just found a bunch of money in her backpack,” Skinny explained. “She may be carrying so much cash with her, but do you believe it?”

“You didn’t find it in my backpack, you put it in,” Zia said.

Skinny laughed. “Put it in? How so? Where would I get that kind of money? Why would I put it in your backpack?”

On Zia’s and Calhoon’s faces, a sneaky smile spread.

“I think it’s obvious,” said Calhoon.

Skinny opened his eyes in horror. “You... you don’t think... you can’t possibly be serious!”

“You were trying to throw suspicion onto Zia,” Calhoon said. “Mighty devious of you. Unfortunately, you couldn’t have known that Zia is above suspicion. She has been working for me for years and would have had more than one opportunity in the past to set aside a lot more money in a much more elegant way. Besides, I pay her well enough that she doesn’t need to steal two hundred thousand dollars. Too bad for you, Skinny. And you were doing so well, right? I was about to blow Wagner’s brains out. Then you would have been out of trouble... and now you have made this regrettable mistake.”

“But I... I...” Skinny stammered and retreated further and further until his back hit a concrete pillar. “This is all a big misunderstanding!”

“I don’t think so. And I’d advise you not to talk any more nonsense, or I might feel like using this wonderful weapon after all.”

“Skinny, you little pipsqueak!” Wagner yelled and lunged at Skinny. He grabbed him by the lapel and threw him against the concrete pillar. “You had the money all along! And you would have stood by and watched this madman take me down!”

“Let him go, Wagner,” Calhoon said calmly.

“Let him go? I will beat the living daylights out of this traitor!”

Calhoon’s voice became icy. “I said let him go. Otherwise, this ‘madman’ can’t guarantee anything.”

Only now did Wagner seem to realize what he had just said. Reluctantly, he let go of Skinny.

“What about me?” Wagner asked. “Won’t you apologize to me?”

“Apologize?” Calhoon laughed. “For what? That I thought you would be so daring to put magazines in the briefcase? You should take it as a compliment. I think you’re a coward... But let’s get back to you, Skinny... You’re not a coward, but you’re not very smart either.”

Skinny swallowed and struggled for composure. He straightened up and relaxed his shoulders. “What do you want from me?”

“I think it’s obvious—the money. If you give it to me right now, you might get lucky and I’ll just call this evening as ‘weird’ instead of ‘highly unpleasant’. If not... well, I think I’ve already made that clear... So where’s my money?”

Bob and Pete held their breath. If Skinny told Calhoon where the money was, it was all over. Calhoon would go with Skinny to the industrial park, take the key from him, open the briefcase—and find a pile of photocopied banknotes. And at that moment, Skinny would tell Calhoon everything about The Three Investigators. What Calhoon would do then as he had Jupiter there with him? Bob and Pete didn't dare to think about it.

The only problem was... Skinny had no idea that the money was still in Tunnel Two. To save his own skin, he would reveal the hiding place of the briefcase. Right now—this very second.

"I..." began Skinny. "I..."

"He doesn't have the money," Jupiter said in a loud, clear voice. All present turned their attention to the First Investigator. Skinny's eyes almost fell out of his head.

"Well, so our visitor can speak after all," Calhoon noted and approached Jupiter. "What did you just say?"

"I said Skinny doesn't have the money... I've got it."

13. No Signal

Jupiter tried to keep calm. His heart was beating up to his neck, but he couldn't let it show. He had realized that a large part of the control that Calhoon had over all those present was based on his self-control and his oversized ego. If the First Investigator wanted to have a chance against him, he had to be at least as cool. As soon as Calhoon sensed that Jupiter was scared, it was over. But it was not for nothing that Jupiter had acted in a television series as a child. He had acting talent... and he needed that now—a lot of it.

"This is where it gets really interesting," said Calhoon. "Usually I don't like to repeat myself, but in case you didn't understand my question earlier—who are you?"

"My name is Jupiter Jones, as you have already found that out."

"And what were you doing on my property?"

"I wanted to see if my plan would work. Unfortunately, I had no way of getting into your house undetected, so I waited in your garden."

"So what's your plan?"

"My plan is for you to accuse Skinny of theft and not get the idea someone else might be behind it... Unfortunately, Zia found me. So now I have to change my plan."

"Change your plan?" Calhoon repeated, and Jupiter believed he saw the huge man's self-confidence crumbling. "I can't shake the feeling that you're pulling my leg. How does a boy like you come to interfere in my business? How do you know Skinny? What's with this business card? And where is my money?"

"I'll explain as soon as you put your gun away. You won't need it," Jupiter said. "And besides that, you are a gentleman, and politeness dictates that you do not threaten a future business associate with a gun."

All those present thought they had misheard, even Pete and Bob in their hiding place could not believe their ears.

"Has he gone completely mad?" whispered Pete. "What is he up to?"

"I don't know," Bob replied. "But we should be ready for anything. I can imagine that things could get very uncomfortable around here very quickly."

"Business associate?" Calhoon asked when he regained his composure. Then he put his gun away. "All right, Jupiter. You're a fearless young lad—unafraid and possibly completely mad—a dangerous combination that will either get you very far or crash you in no time. Perhaps your fate will be decided in three minutes. That's exactly how much time I'm giving you to convince me. Tell me your story—now! And I advise you to tell me the truth."

Jupiter cleared his throat and shook his head. "My story is completely unimportant. What matters is that I have the money and I can give it to you... provided we do business."

"Do business? What kind of business?" Calhoon snapped.

"The same thing you've already concluded with Wagner—I give you the money, you give me the funny money—two million fake dollars for two hundred thousand real ones—right now! Otherwise, you won't get your money, unless Mr Wagner stumps up the amount. But I doubt you'll be able to come to an agreement with him on this point." Jupiter made the most casual expression he was capable of. Coolness was everything. If he managed to keep up with Calhoon's level, he had a real chance to get away with this hair-raising story. If not...

Calhoon did not answer immediately. He did not laugh either. He looked at Jupiter completely expressionless.

Wagner could no longer hold on to himself. “Calhoon, if you think I had anything to do with this guy, I’m afraid—”

Calhoon cut him off with a quick gesture. “Silence, Wagner! I can’t stand your gibberish any longer! I know you have nothing to do with the boy. He’d never have anything to do with a fool like you...”

Then he slowly went to the table and reached for his drink, which he had left there. Wordlessly he passed the stunned Wagner, the pale Skinny and the eagerly awaiting Beaumont and Zia, took a little walk around the room and returned.

“And now to you, Jupiter, so you know where the money is?”

“That’s right.”

“And you want to do business with me.”

“Yes.”

“You are really very brave, Jupiter. But courage does not always get you where you want to go. I have to agree with you about one thing—your story is completely unimportant. I don’t care how you got the briefcase. I only care about getting back what’s mine. I’m sure your suggestion is very interesting, but I’m afraid I won’t go into it... because I have a better idea.

“And now I advise you to listen to me very carefully... either you tell me where the money is or I’ll blow your head off...” Calhoon had spoken in an almost casual conversation. But now his light green eyes narrowed and his voice became icy. “Now!”

For the second time, he drew his gun.

Jupiter swallowed. What was his plan again? Not to show his fear? To stay cool?

“That’s enough,” Pete whispered and pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. “I don’t care if we have proof or not. I’m calling Cotta now!” He already had his thumb on the power button.

Bob quickly put his hand over the mobile phone. “Not here! They’ll hear us from here! We have to go somewhere else!”

Pete just nodded and immediately set off. They had no time to lose! Ducked, they returned to the stairs they had climbed. Pete looked around the corner.

Zia, Beaumont and Wagner were facing the stairs, so they had to find another way. He motioned to Bob, and they retreated. On the other side of the gallery, there was another staircase. Here they were safe from the eyes of those present. They crept down quietly and ducked down behind a flat concrete platform with a couple of chairs on it.

“What now?” whispered Pete.

Bob shrugged helplessly. They were no longer in the gallery, but still within earshot. The corridor leading to the bathroom was now on the other side of the room. It was impossible to get there unnoticed. They had to find another place... and fast!

Desperately, Bob looked around. There was no door, no passageway, nothing to cover them! Suddenly, he spotted something at his feet. It was a small metal hook. Bob looked at it with irritation. The hook was part of a steel plate that was embedded in the floor. It was a hatch! They were squatting right on it. Bob had no idea where it led to, but they had no choice—they had to hurry! He gave Pete a signal.

The Second Investigator understood. They crawled aside, Bob reached for the metal hook, prayed that the hinges wouldn’t squeak—and pulled very slowly.

The bottom flap swung open—not completely silent, but almost. No one seemed to notice anything. Steel rungs embedded in the wall led down. Bob did not hesitate for a second and climbed down. Pete followed him and closed the hatch silently.

Deep black darkness enveloped them. Bob carefully groped his way down until he reached the bottom of the ladder where he had solid ground under his feet again. He pulled out his lighter and let it flare up to make it easier for Pete to descend.

“Perfect,” Pete sighed, pulled the mobile phone out of his pocket again and turned it on. Now he would call Inspector Cotta, who would show up in a few minutes with a few policemen in tow and rescue Jupiter.

Pete stared at the display and waited... and waited. Finally, a message appeared: ‘No Signal’.

14. Calhoon's Workshop

Jupiter looked into the barrel of the gun. Obviously he had overestimated his powers of persuasion. Calhoon left no doubt that he was serious about his threat.

"You tell me where the money is right now, Jupiter Jones, or you can watch me spread your friend's brains all over the house. Then it's your turn afterwards."

"My... my friend?" Jupiter stammered.

"Skinny... or do you think I didn't notice you two were in cahoots from the start?"

"But that—"

Calhoon took three big steps towards Skinny and held the gun to his head. "Out with it!"

Skinny whimpered and threw a conjuring glance at Jupiter.

"You better do what he says, kid," Zia advised in an almost soft voice. "Calhoon does not joke on such matters."

Calhoon audibly pulled back the hammer. "I'll give you five more seconds."

"All right," Jupiter finally said. "The money is in a briefcase hidden at an unused factory building. It is chained there. Skinny has the key."

Calhoon smiled with satisfaction. "There you go." He turned to Skinny and stretched out his hand demanding.

Skinny understood. With trembling fingers, he pulled the key out of his pocket and handed it to Calhoon. Then he threw Jupiter a look which he could not interpret. Skinny was obviously not grateful to him for having just saved his life. He was also not angry that Jupiter had revealed the location of the briefcase. Instead, he seemed desperate... but Jupiter had no idea why.

"Then I suggest we all go to that factory together and get that money," Calhoon said. "On the way there, I'll think of what to do with you two. Let's go!"

On the way to the door, Jupiter searched the room from the corners of his eyes for Pete and Bob. He did not see them. But they were probably still in their hiding place and had listened to every word. As soon as they were all out of the door, they would immediately call Inspector Cotta and direct him to the spice factory.

Although there was still no evidence of the counterfeit money, perhaps the evidence would be sufficient for a search warrant for Calhoon's house. With a bit of luck, the police would find something and The Three Investigators would get off with a black eye.

All that really mattered now was that Cotta made it to the factory grounds before Calhoon discovered that there were only photocopied banknotes in the briefcase, because Jupiter didn't want to think about what Calhoon was capable of then.

The First Investigator tried to relax. Rescue was almost upon them. Everything would be all right.

Jupiter, Skinny, Calhoon, Wagner, Beaumont and Zia left the house.

"Damn! I don't believe it!"

"Shh!" Bob did. "Do you want them to hear us after all?"

"Why aren't we getting any mobile signal? This can't be happening!"

"We're probably too deep under the ground," Bob pondered.

"I'm going to climb up a few steps up the ladder and try again," the Second Investigator decided and put his foot on the lowest rung. In no time at all he was back under the hatch. From there he started a second attempt... No signal again.

"Damn!" He climbed back down. "Now what?"

"Maybe it'll work somewhere else," Bob said, holding up his lighter.

On the wall, he discovered a light switch. A row of fluorescent lights flashed up, flickering and buzzing. A long, completely bare concrete corridor lay before them. It ended at a white steel door. They walked towards it, and Bob pushed the door handle down.

The two detectives entered a basement room. Bob turned on the light. The room was huge, but the ceiling was very low. There was strange equipment everywhere. While Pete wandered around the room with his mobile phone, Bob looked at the equipment more closely.

"Pete?"

"Huh?"

"I think I know where we are..."

"Me too... in Calhoon's basement."

"Not only that, this is his counterfeiting workshop. Look! This machine is used to make the paper... and that there is a printing press. It's a lot like the one we have in our outdoor workshop."

"Well," mumbled Pete. "Only about a thousand times more modern."

"There's a paper cutter over there. And here..." Bob whistled through his teeth. "Look what we have here." Next to Bob on a white table was a stack of large-format papers. He held the top one up so Pete could see it.

Now the Second Investigator was indeed distracted for a moment. "Banknotes!" he burst out.

"Exactly. First-class forgeries that only need to be cut," Bob remarked. "I'd say we've just found the proof of Calhoon's business."

"Then all I need now is a mobile phone signal, and everything is in perfect order," Pete replied and continued his walk through the basement room.

Against all expectations, he was lucky. In the furthest corner of the counterfeit money factory, his mobile phone suddenly received signal.

"Great!" Pete chose Inspector Cotta's number from the phone book and waited.

"Yeah?"

"Inspector Cotta? This is Pete Crenshaw. We need your help."

Cotta was not the easiest person to deal with. The fact that he and The Three Investigators had helped each other many times did not mean that Cotta appreciated the work of The Three Investigators, on the contrary, at every opportunity, he tried to curb their detective zeal—with moderate success, of course. But one thing The Three Investigators knew very well—when it mattered, Cotta was on their side, and they could always count on him in an emergency.

So once again Cotta saved all the questions. All he wanted to know was 'where'?

"We are in the house of a counterfeiter. He has a gun on Jupiter. Four people in all, who could be dangerous." The Second Investigator then gave the address of Calhoon's estate.

"We're on our way," Cotta said and hung up.

"That's done." Pete sighed in relief. "Cotta is on his way. Come on Bob, we're going back upstairs. Jupiter is in serious trouble. Until Cotta arrives, perhaps only we can prevent the worst."

Bob nodded, and together they headed back.

As Bob slowly and carefully pushed up the hatch, he flinched. The bright light had gone out. Only a few weak lamps still illuminated the room.

And he no longer heard any voices either. Alarmed, he climbed out of the opening, peered carefully over the concrete platform—and finally straightened up completely. He no longer needed any cover.

“Damn!” Bob exclaimed. “They are not here!”

15. The Wild Goose Chase

Zia didn't let Jupiter out of her sight. The young woman sat next to him in the back seat of the silver Lincoln and watched him like a hawk. Calhoon was at the wheel, Skinny beside him. Wagner and Beaumont were in the red Plymouth right behind them. Obviously, they didn't want to miss anything.

After a few minutes, they reached the spice factory, and got out in silence. Jupiter cast an inconspicuous glance down the street. No police there far and wide. But it could only be a matter of minutes before Cotta and his men showed up.

"All right, now where is the briefcase?" Calhoon asked and stared first at Skinny, then at Jupiter piercingly.

No one answered.

"Come on!" Calhoon barked and pulled out his gun.

"It's all right," Jupiter said quickly. "I'll take you there."

He led Calhoon and the others to the door in the fence. They entered the neglected area, and soon the abandoned factory building appeared before them out of the darkness. Jupiter headed for the steel frame to which they had chained the briefcase, but his attention was drawn to the deep shadows of the ruins in which Cotta's people might have been hiding.

So he only noticed it when they were standing right in front of it—the chain was still wrapped around the scaffolding... but the briefcase had gone!

"What!" Jupiter exclaimed.

"I suppose I'm supposed to believe that just a short time ago, the briefcase with my money was right here," Calhoon said. Although he spoke calmly and softly, his composure had completely disappeared.

Jupiter felt his anger. "I swear to you, Mr Calhoon, that's exactly what it was."

"Honestly, I don't care what it was. I just want to know where the money is. And since I am slowly getting the impression that I am still expressing myself too vaguely, I will be clearer from now on... Zia!"

The movement was so fast that Jupiter hardly noticed it. Zia, who had been standing next to Calhoon, jumped forward, turned and kicked Jupiter in the midriff. He was left breathless. He staggered back, stumbled and fell hard on his back.

Stars danced before his eyes as he forced himself to ignore the pain raging in his stomach. He coughed. And for a moment, he wished that the stars and the cough would not disappear so that he could escape into unconsciousness and reality would not reach him anymore. But then his eyes cleared and he saw Calhoon standing broad-legged above him.

There was still no sign of Cotta.

"I'm running out of patience," Calhoon burst out. "You tell me where the money is right now!"

"I don't know!" Jupiter gasped.

"Wrong answer." Calhoon pointed his gun at Jupiter and fired.

The bullet hit the dusty ground ten centimetres from Jupiter's head. Dirt and earth sprayed onto his face. His left ear was numb, his heart was pounding faster than ever, and suddenly it was clear to him—Cotta was not here!

Something had gone wrong! He didn't know what, but the help that he had been counting on was not here. At the latest now, after this shot, the policemen should have jumped out of the surrounding bushes and behind the walls—but nothing like that happened. Jupiter was on his own. He was lost. The panic that this realization triggered in him took his breath away and almost took his mind away as well. What should he do now?

"The next bullet will be on target, Jupiter Jones. So I ask you for the last time... Where is the money?"

"I don't know!" Jupiter shouted desperately.

Calhoon raised his gun again. "How unfortunate."

Jupiter closed his eyes and counted the last seconds of his life.

"Stop!"

Jupiter opened his eyes again. Who had said 'stop'? Who had given him another moment's respite? He turned his head.

It was Skinny Norris!

"I know where the case is," said Skinny. "Mike has it... Mike Watson—your boy."

"What?" hissed Calhoon.

"What?" Jupiter asked at the same time and stood up.

Wagner and Beaumont, who had previously kept themselves in the background, laughed softly.

Skinny's words were directed at Jupiter: "Mike had a second key from the beginning. He was to get the case as soon as we left."

"That little rat," Calhoon growled with clenched teeth.

Jupiter stood up completely, wiped the dirt off his cheeks and looked at Skinny with a combination of surprise and even a hint of admiration.

"So you had insurance, huh?" Juve remarked. "You didn't trust me..."

"Neither do you," Skinny replied.

"Apparently, with good reason," Jupiter said.

"I hate to interrupt you two in your witty exchange of words," Calhoon said icily. "But the next bullet is still going to find its mark, and this time I am aiming at you, Skinny, unless you tell me where Mike is right this second."

Skinny swallowed. "He's at the old, dilapidated house on the outskirts of Rocky Beach that we use as a shelter. He's waiting for me there... with the briefcase... I hope."

"I hope so for your sake," Calhoon said.

As Pete approached the spice factory, he switched off the headlights of his MG. There was no way he wanted to be seen by Calhoon.

Bob and Pete had quickly realized that Jupiter must have revealed the hiding place of the briefcase and the whole gang was on their way to the industrial park. Therefore, before leaving the house, Pete had called the inspector again and asked him to bypass Calhoon's house and go to the spice factory instead.

But neither a police contingent nor anyone else was waiting for them outside the factory grounds. There was no car on the road. There was no one in sight. Pete slowed down and turned off the engine. "Where is everybody?"

"Cotta's not here yet," Bob noted. "And Calhoon..."

"Maybe he parked somewhere else and walked to the factory grounds," Pete thought.

"We have to check it out!" Bob decided and got out.

"Are you sure?"

“Yes! Or are you going to leave Jupe alone?”

“Of course not! But...”

“Come on, then!” Bob urged.

Pete overcame his fear and followed Bob. Together they crept along the edge of the fence until they finally reached the door. It was open.

“They are here!” Pete whispered and listened. But apart from distant street noise and the chirping of cicadas, nothing could be heard.

Bob waved to Pete and went through the door. Reluctantly, the Second Investigator went after him. Carefully and paying attention to every step, they ventured further and further into the factory grounds. Soon the old building appeared, but still, nobody was to be seen.

And finally Bob stood in front of the steel scaffolding staring at the chain. “The briefcase has disappeared! That means—”

“That Calhoon and company are gone again!” Pete concluded. “Damn!”

“Come on, Pete, we gotta hurry! Back to the house!”

It was dark in that old, dilapidated house. While the group followed Skinny from room to room, Jupiter had only one thing on his mind—hopefully Mike wasn’t here! Hopefully he had left and never came back, otherwise Jupiter would be in big trouble again in a few seconds.

“Skinny?” Mike’s nervous voice came from a room next door.

“Yes,” Skinny replied.

“Gee, dude, I’m glad you’re finally here. It took you a long time to dupe Calhoon after all, huh? But he’s not the only one who got duped, man. Guess what?”

Skinny entered the room where Mike was sitting on the dusty floor in the moonlight. The moonlight fell on the aluminium case. Mike looked up—and froze as Calhoon, Jupiter and the others entered the room behind Skinny.

For a second, nobody spoke a word. Then Mike jumped up with a lightning bolt, dived for the window and ripped it open. But before he managed to climb out, Zia was already at his side and grabbed him by his T-shirt. A moment later, Mike was lying with his back on the ground and Calhoon was standing over him.

“Mike Watson,” he said, shaking his head. “Who would have thought a little rat like you would dare to stand up to your lord and master.”

“I... I can explain, sir!” Mike stammered.

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’m very excited about that.”

“It was Skinny’s idea! I had nothing to do with it! He made me do it!”

“What?” Skinny yelled at Mike angrily. “You’re lying! I didn’t force you... or anyone!”

“Yes! You... you...” Mike stammered.

“Enough!” yelled Calhoon. “I will gladly watch you scratch each other’s eyes out—after I have my money! I suppose it’s in that case?”

Skinny nodded.

Mike shook his head.

Jupiter swallowed.

“What does that mean?” Calhoon didn’t wait for the answer, but jumped on the case and tore the lid off. It didn’t take him a second to realize what he was in for.

“Copies?” he shouted. “Copied bank notes?”

Skinny’s head was twitching around. In disbelief, he stared at Jupiter. “So much for trust,” he murmured so softly that only the First Investigator could hear it.

Jupe grinned in agony and raised his shoulders.

Wagner, who had stopped in the doorway together with Beaumont, laughed. “You’re getting old, Calhoon... or how do you explain that even a gang of teenagers is smarter than ___”

“Shut up, Wagner!” Calhoon yelled. The cool, serene façade had collapsed within seconds. Now nothing held him back. He grabbed Mike and pulled him up with a jerk, like he wasn’t heavier than a sack of Styrofoam. “Where is it? Where... is... my... money?”

Mike stared at him from panic-stricken eyes. Then he reached out his hand and pointed at Jupiter. “He’s got it! He must have it! It’s the only explanation!”

Calhoon did not reply, but tossed Mike away like a rag doll and then pounced on Jupiter. The First Investigator was thrown around and hit his back painfully against the wall. Then Calhoon got so close that Jupiter’s warm breath hit his face. He could see the tiny beads of sweat on Calhoon’s face, the tiny ruptured blood vessels in his bright green eyes, and the pulsating veins in his forehead and neck. He came even closer and spoke directly into Jupiter’s right ear.

“You have just signed your death sentence, Jupiter Jones. Maybe I take it back if you do everything right from now on. Otherwise, I’ll crush you with my own hands, is that clear? ... I said is that clear?”

Jupiter nodded dazedly.

“Good. I don’t want to have to repeat myself. You know the question. If the answer is wrong this time, you’re dead.”

Jupiter had to clear his throat before he made a sound. “The money is in a secret hiding place in the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard. I will take you there.”

16. Into the Tunnel!

“No, I’m not pulling your leg, Inspector Cotta,” Bob assured the inspector. “It’s just... it’s all a little difficult to explain. Just please go back to the house as soon as possible, I promise Jupiter will explain everything in detail.”

“I’m sure he’ll do that,” Cotta growled and hung up.

Sighing, Bob put the mobile phone back in his pocket.

“Cotta doesn’t think we take him seriously,” he said to Pete, who was at the wheel and steered the MG back to Calhoon’s estate as fast as the speed limit allowed.

“He will calm down again,” Pete replied nervously. The whole situation tore at his nerves. It was really high time for the police to intervene... before anything happened to Jupiter!

They reached Calhoon’s house. Pete slowed down, let himself roll slowly past the gate with a glance to the side—and suddenly stepped on the brakes.

Bob was thrown forward. The seat belt pulled him back brutally. “Goodness, Pete, are you an idiot?”

“They’re not here!” Pete said and pointed to the house. The property was still brightly lit, but there was no light behind the small, asymmetrical windows... and not a single car was in front of the house.

“I don’t believe it! If they left the spice factory before us, they should be back here by now!”

“Headquarters!” Bob burst out and stared at Pete. “They’re on their way to Headquarters! Calhoon found the photocopied banknotes and confronted Juve! We should have thought of that right away. My goodness, who knows what he did to him. We must—”

“—Go back immediately,” Pete finished the sentence, and drove off so fast that Bob was pushed into the backrest this time. “Call Cotta! Tell him to get to the salvage yard right away!”

“He’ll think we’re completely crazy if I call him again now,” Bob replied, but he was already dialling the inspector’s number.

“Inspector Cotta? ... Yeah, it’s me again, Bob Andrews. I’m really sorry, but there’s been another change in plans.”

Bob was right. Cotta almost exploded on the phone, but finally he promised to take his people to the salvage yard as soon as possible.

A few minutes later, Bob and Pete reached the salvage yard. Neither Calhoon’s nor Wagner’s car was there!

“What does that mean now?” Pete asked uneasily.

“That they will probably show up here any second,” Bob replied. “And Cotta too, hopefully... but maybe we should play it safe and in case something goes wrong—”

“—We’ll take the money away!” Pete finished the sentence.

“Absolutely,” Bob agreed. “Let’s hurry!”

They got out and headed for Red Gate Rover. Pete reached through the knothole with his index finger and released a catch. A few boards in the fence swung up, and one after the other, they squeezed through the narrow opening and hurried to the trailer.

"It's still here," Pete sighed with relief when he saw the blue plastic bag in Tunnel Two. He reached for it. "The question is, where to put it now?"

"We'll just take it with us and hide it at a safe distance from here," Bob suggested. "Then we can watch calmly as Inspector Cotta has the gangsters arrested as soon as they show up here."

"Good idea." Pete let the floor hatch close, opened the door to the outside—and closed it again immediately.

"What is it?" Bob asked. "Why don't you go out?"

"They are here!" whispered Pete in horror. "Calhoon and Zia and everyone else! Jupiter has just led them through front gate!"

Bob's heart stopped. He rushed to the 'See-All' periscope that was constructed from stove pipes fitted with mirrors, which allowed the salvage yard to be observed unnoticed.

There they were—the whole gang, including Mike, was headed straight for Headquarters!

"It's all over now," Pete whimpered.

"No," Bob said. "It's not." With a jerk, he opened up Tunnel Two one more time. "Come on, Pete! We'll take the tunnel to the outside! Calhoon will never get his hands on us... and the money!"

"But... the tunnel is littered with old files!" Pete exclaimed. True, because they had not been using Tunnel Two for a while, and they had stored old folders and documents there.

"Then, we'll have to remove them—as much as possible," Bob instructed. "Quick!"

Bob reached in and grabbed bundles of folders and handed them to Pete, who chucked them at the back of the trailer. It took them less than 15 seconds to clear just enough for the two of them to squeeze into the tunnel.

"Get in!" Bob gave the Second Investigator a shove.

Pete jumped into the tunnel and got down on all fours, clutching the plastic bag with the money along. Bob was right behind him. He hurriedly closed the floor hatch. Not a second too soon as he could hear footsteps approaching the trailer.

"Go forward, Pete! But be quiet!" Bob whispered into the darkness in front of him. "They're going to open the hatch any moment now!"

"I can hardly get past the rest of the rubbish here!" grunted the Second Investigator.

"Then push them away," Bob urged. "Go on!"

"Luckily Jupe is not in here, or he'll get stuck again!" Pete quipped.

Pete struggled to push the folders aside in absolute darkness so far that he could get past them. Finally he succeeded, and he crawled forward with the bag between his teeth.

At that moment, they heard the door to Headquarters being ripped open and heavy steps rumbled into the trailer. But then Pete had reached the end of the tunnel, pushed away the metal grating that was leaning there and crawled into the open-air workshop.

"Now where's this hiding place?" they heard Calhoon's angry voice.

"There, sir," replied Jupiter. "Under this hatch."

Now Bob also crawled out into the open. At the same second, a dim light fell into the tunnel behind him. Calhoon had opened the hatch.

"And where is it exactly?" he barked.

"I..." Jupiter stammered. "I don't understand it!" Maybe Jupiter said something else. But it was completely submerged in Calhoon's rage roar.

"Let's get out of here," Bob said, hurrying across the salvage yard to the front gate. "It's gonna blow!"

"And what about Jupe?" Pete asked.

“Cotta will be here any second,” Bob said. “He—”

“There! Look! The two guys! They got the bag!”

Bob turned around. Mike, who was at the doorway to Headquarters and had seen them!

“Run!” Bob cried and ran as fast as he could. Calhoon and Zia were already out of the trailer and Zia began the pursuit.

The Second Investigator had already reached the front gate. A moment later, he was in the street and ran to his car.

Bob was a bit behind. “Pete, we have a serious problem!”

“What are we gonna do?” Pete asked as he threw the bag of money in the back seat.

“You’re still asking? Just go!”

“Come on, get in.” The Second Investigator started the engine.

Bob had no time to think. He wasn’t all the way in the car when Pete stepped on the accelerator. With squealing tyres, the MG shot down the street.

17. Strange Bedfellows

For a moment, Jupiter had been convinced that his last hour had come... and two seconds later Zia and Calhoon were already out the door, chasing Bob and Pete.

Jupiter rushed outside. He saw his friends disappear through the front gate. Zia was hard on their heels, with Calhoon running behind her. Immediately, Jupiter also ran off, but sensed someone was behind him. As he turned around, he saw that it was Skinny.

"You freaks!" Skinny gasped and caught up with the First Investigator. "You complete idiots! You messed up everything!"

They got out of the front gate at the same time. Jupiter just saw Pete's MG shoot away and Calhoon and Zia jumped into the silver Lincoln.

"You fat oaf!" Skinny hissed and stared at Jupiter in rage. "There goes my money! You betrayed me!"

"Likewise," Jupiter replied, watching helplessly and desperately as Calhoon started the engine and set off in pursuit. "But please see that I have other worries at the moment."

"You're talking about your worries?" Skinny said scornfully. "I'm talking about two hundred thousand dollars!"

Suddenly Jupiter's burst out: "That guy will kill Bob and Pete if he catches them! And you're talking about your pathetic money?"

"Everybody has his priorities," Skinny replied coldly. "But we can't change anything now."

"No," Jupiter said, depressed. Then his eyes fell on Beaumont's red Plymouth. "Unless..." He looked back. Beaumont, Wagner and Mike weren't in any particular hurry. They were only halfway to the front gate.

Jupiter ran over to the car and found that it was unlocked.

"Skinny!" cried Jupiter excitedly. "Can you hot-wire an ignition?"

"Excuse me?"

"Can you start a car without keys?"

"Sure. Who can't? I mean—"

"Then do it quick!" Jupiter pointed to the Plymouth. "I'll go lock the rest of them in the salvage yard."

As Skinny rushed to the car, Jupiter ran back to the front gate, closed and locked it.

Wagner saw him and shouted: "Hey! What are you doing?"

Suddenly, Beaumont ran up to the gate and rattled it furiously. Meanwhile, Juve had gone back to the Plymouth, just in time as Skinny got the engine started.

Pete stepped on it. For a brief moment, he thought they were safe. But then he looked in the rearview mirror. "The Lincoln is behind us!"

"What?" Bob turned around. Calhoon's Lincoln picked up speed. "Now what?"

"We've got to lose them somehow," Pete said and went through the city map of Rocky Beach and the surrounding area in his mind.

"Lose them? No offence, Pete, but your car doesn't stand a chance against Calhoon's bullet!"

“On a highway, maybe not, but in the middle of town...” Pete only slowed down a bit, then he turned the steering wheel around and shot into a side street at breakneck speed.

“Pete!” gasped Bob. “Have you gone mad?”

“Just let me do it. As you know, I am the master of the desert road!”

“But this is not a desert road! It’s not a computer game either!”

“Makes little difference,” Pete claimed and fixed his eyes on the street. A strange combination of total adrenalin and absolute calm had taken possession of him.

Ahead of him was an intersection. The light was green... then yellow. It was still fifty metres away.

“Pete, you can’t make it,” Bob warned.

“Let’s see!”

The light turned red. Pete shot across the intersection. Laughing, he looked in the rear-view mirror. The Lincoln was a few seconds behind him.

“He wouldn’t dare.”

Calhoon dared. The Lincoln raced after the MG at an undiminished pace. Brakes squeaked. A car coming out of the side street honked and crossed the road. Then Calhoon was across the intersection.

“Why am I doing this?” Skinny asked as he chased after Calhoon.

“Because you want your money,” replied Jupiter. “If you can take Calhoon out of action, you’ll get it. I promise.”

“Take Calhoon out?” echoed Skinny. “Are you crazy? He’ll break me to pieces! And you too!”

“You are not supposed to physically fight him,” replied Jupiter. “It would be enough to divert him somehow.”

“And then what? Then he comes after me! I think you’re crazy, Jones! Why would I take the rap for you and your stupid friends?”

“You’re not doing this for us. You are doing it to get the money,” Jupiter insisted.

“Nonsense! The money goes to the cops in the end, that’s obvious! Do you really think I’m going to fall for another one of your stupid plans, Jones?”

They saw Pete’s MG skip a red light, and Calhoon, after nearly hitting another vehicle, went after Pete. Skinny, however, slowed down and finally stopped at the traffic light. “This ride ends here.”

“Skinny!” cried Jupiter desperately. “The street is as good as empty! Go on!”

“The light is red.”

“You stole a car a minute ago, and now you care about a red light! Come on, Skinny, step on it!”

Skinny remained calm. “Why would I do that? Give me one good reason, Jones!”

“Because—” Jupiter broke off. His brain was empty. He couldn’t think of a single argument... unless Skinny was just out to humiliate him. Then he just said: “Because I asked you to...”

Skinny laughed out loud. “That was a good one! But I have to disappoint you... Request denied.”

“Then do it for the money!” Jupiter yelled.

“I’m not gonna get the money, Jones!” Skinny was convinced. “You know that as well as I do! I haven’t the slightest reason to believe you... or even trust you...”

“But...” Jupiter started but he realized that it was no use. Skinny was right. There was no trust between them—not a shred.

Jupiter was desperate. He saw the silver Lincoln disappearing at the end of the street. He had to do something! How could it be that everything slipped out of his hands? Now he couldn't even handle Skinny Norris! The First Investigator let his shoulders droop.

“Okay. You won. I failed. There's actually absolutely no reason why you should help us. We mistrusted and betrayed you. If we hadn't, Calhoon would have found the money with Mike and maybe left us alone. But today, everything just went wrong. I didn't heed your warning. I thought it was gonna be easy, but I made one mistake after another. And if I'm unlucky, Bob and Pete will pay for my mistakes with their lives.”

“The plan could have worked, Jones!” Skinny suddenly shouted and pounded on the steering wheel. “You would have got Calhoon and I would have the money! Why didn't you keep your end of the bargain?”

“What about you?” Jupe countered. “Why didn't you keep your end of the bargain?”

“Because—” Skinny was silent.

The light turned green. Then Jupiter had an idea. “We will try again. You help us, we help you. You go after Calhoon, and we'll get you the money.”

Skinny gave him a sceptical look. “And why should I trust you this time?”

“Because my friends' lives are now in your hands... and because I trust you. Come on, Skinny.” Jupiter pleaded.

Skinny Norris hesitated. “What are you talking about, Jones? You'd almost think we were friends or something.”

“Friends? Certainly not,” Jupiter said. “But now we are in a situation that we need to help each other? So I put the question to you again—will you help us?”

Skinny pulled a face. “And will I really get the money?”

“I can't keep the police off you,” Jupiter confessed. “But The Three Investigators will not obstruct you in getting the money and go, but to escape from the police is your business. That's all I can offer you... Help us, Skinny.”

For four or five heartbeats, Skinny just looked at him. Then he said: “Before you report me for failure to assist, all right.” Skinny agreed. “And now what? Calhoon is already long gone. We'll never find him again.”

“Yes, we will.”

“And how?”

“Let me worry about that,” Jupiter said. “Just drive!”

Skinny stepped on it.

18. In the Nick of Time

When the MG raced at full speed over a hilltop, Pete could have sworn he was in free flight for a full second before crashing back onto the road. "Ouch! The shocks won't like that."

Bob clawed at the door handle. His face was as white as a ghost. "Gee, Pete, maybe we should just stop."

"Stop? And fall into the hands of that lunatic? Have you gone mad?"

"Maybe he's not so crazy. He just wants his money and—"

A shot was whipped through the air. Pete saw the sparks fly up on the asphalt next to him. He gasped in horror.

"What was that? He just wants his money? This freak is shooting at us!"

Bob looked back. Calhoon had caught up. Zia had leaned her limber body out the window and pointed her gun at the MG. "Zia is aiming at our tyres!"

"I don't care. Hold on!" Pete stepped on the brakes, cranked the wheel and stepped on the accelerator again. The car went into a curve so fast that Bob was pressed against the side window. He was sick.

"Shouldn't I be driving?" he suggested timidly.

"You like to joke," Pete said and took a look in the rearview mirror. "Hey, I think I lost Calhoon! He didn't make the turn!"

Then the silver Lincoln showed up again. "Oh! He's done it after all. Calhoon is really good." Now Pete was getting restless. He couldn't think of any tactics to lose their pursuer.

Suddenly the mobile phone rang in Bob's pocket. Bob didn't answer.

"What is it?" asked Pete. "Why don't you answer it?"

"Pete, we're being chased halfway across town by a maniac, and you want me to answer the phone?"

"Maybe it's important!" Pete said. "Maybe it's Cotta!"

Bob looked at Pete with irritation for a moment, then he accepted the call. "Yes?"

"Hi, Bob. It's me."

"Jupe! We are—"

"—In trouble, I know. That's why I'm calling," Jupiter said. "We're on your tail, but we're a little lost. Where are you right now?"

Bob looked outside. "At the intersection of De La Vina Street and Washington Road."

"Okay, we're on our way," Jupiter said. "We're gonna try and cut Calhoon off."

"That's a pretty good idea. But who is 'we'?"

"Skinny and I."

"Skinny?"

"Yes. This is his mobile phone that I'm using right now. I'll explain later. So, we're on De La Vina Street now."

"And Pete is turning straight onto Ocean View Boulevard."

Bang!

"What was that?" Jupe asked, startled.

"That was Zia. She's shooting at us," Bob said.

"Wait, now I see Calhoon's car!" Jupe yelled. "We're behind him!"

Bob looked back. Indeed... behind the silver Lincoln, the red Plymouth had appeared.

"Jupe, you're in the Plymouth?" Bob asked.

"Yes!" Jupe replied.

"Great. What now?" Skinny asked.

"Now for the Jupiter Jones special manoeuvre."

"Special manoeuvre?" Skinny wondered uneasily. "It sounds like something I don't like."

"It's easy, Skinny, we just have to be quick. Trust me."

Skinny grinned torturedly, but did not answer.

Jupiter turned back to the mobile phone. "Bob, tell Pete to turn left on the next street, and then turn left again on the next one. We'll take an earlier left now, and then cut Calhoon off at the right moment."

Bob passed the instructions to the Second Investigator. The Second Investigator protested.

"Jupe, Pete says that's West Oak Street. It's a dead end!"

"I know," replied Jupiter. "But it's the only street that'll work. It is so narrow that Calhoon can't get past us if we block the road. Let's go! I am hanging up now. Call Cotta and ask him to go to West Oak Street! And tell Pete to pick up the pace in the last few metres!" Jupiter ended the connection.

"Over there, on the left," he told Skinny.

"And you think this is gonna work?"

"I don't know. It has to be very precise. You slow down a short distance from the intersection, and then when I tell you, you drive immediately to the middle of the intersection, stop the car and we run out as fast as we can. Got it?"

"Sure. I hope you know what you are doing."

They approached the dark intersection and Skinny slowed down.

Then the roar of Pete's MG became loud. And suddenly the Second Investigator's car shot past right in front of their nose from right to left.

"Now!" cried Jupiter.

Skinny stepped on the accelerator. The Plymouth made a leap forward and stopped right in the middle of the intersection.

Jupiter looked out the window.

Calhoon raced up, wildly honking. The silver Lincoln was racing up too fast!

Jupiter opened the door, tried to climb out of the car and was almost strangled by the seat belt. With flying fingers, he searched for the button. The seatbelt snapped up. Jupiter finally got out of the car. With tyres squealing, the Lincoln's headlights caught him and blinded him.

Half blind, the First Investigator leaped out of the way just in time. Tyres continued to squeal. The Lincoln could not stop in time and it rammed into Beaumont's Plymouth with a deafening noise.

Glass splinters shot through the air. A tyre blew with the blast of a bomb. Jupiter closed his eyes and ran. Only after a few seconds did he dare to look back.

Calhoon had hurled the Plymouth ten metres down the road. Both cars were steaming wrecks of shattered metal and glass. The entire front half of the Lincoln was squeezed together like an accordion, with the engine block popping out of it like metal guts. Behind it, Jupiter only saw the big white cushions of the air bags. Calhoon and Zia had been lucky. But Jupiter would have been surprised if they hadn't fainted on impact.

"Jupe!" Pete's voice echoed through the darkness.

The First Investigator ran down a dead-end street. The road ended in front of a two-metre-high brick wall. The MG was parked right in front of it. And there they stood—Pete, Bob and Skinny, all three of them with trembling knees and their eyes fixed on the two wrecked cars.

“Jupe!” cried Bob. “Man, that was—”

“—Spectacular,” Pete remarked. “Really...”

“Did you get to Cotta?” Jupiter asked.

Bob nodded. “He’s on his way.”

“Good.”

“Then let’s get to the second part of our deal before your dear friend shows up here,” Skinny spoke up and stretched out his hand. “The money, if you please.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked, irritated.

“The money! Now!” Skinny insisted.

“Give it to him, Pete,” Jupiter asked.

“Jupe! I don’t think I’m hearing you right!”

“Yes, you did,” Jupe calmly said. “We have a deal—I couldn’t done this car chase alone. Skinny helped us, and we’ll give him the money.”

“But—”

“Come on, Crenshaw!” growled Skinny. “The cops are coming!”

“But Jupe—” Pete tried again.

“I gave him my word, Pete,” Jupe explained. “And this time I will keep it.”

“We’re talking about Skinny Norris, Jupe!” Pete said indignantly.

“It makes no difference. He saved your life. Give him the money.”

Pete did not respond. But then Bob opened the door of the MG, reached for the blue plastic bag and handed it to Skinny.

Skinny took a look inside the bag, nodded contentedly and turned to leave.

“Hey, Skinny!” Jupiter held him back. “Thanks for your help.”

Skinny grinned and held up the money bag. “Likewise...”

Pete was not so conciliatory. “Do you really think you can get away with this, Skinny? The police will get you sooner or later... no question about it.”

“Let me worry about that!” Skinny turned around.

And suddenly the driver’s door of the steaming Lincoln wreck opened and Calhoon got out. There was a gash on his forehead. A curtain of blood covered his face. He held his gun in his hand and limped towards The Three Investigators and Skinny. His gaze burned in unbridled rage.

“You brats! You brats! Give me my money!” He raised his gun and fired. The bullet hit the brick wall. Stone splinters flew through the air.

Skinny swung out and threw the bag over the wall in a high arch.

By that time, Calhoon was right in front of them. There was no way to escape.

“Okay,” he said in a gurgling voice as his own blood ran down his lips and chin and dripped onto the floor. “I suppose that was my money that just flew over the wall? I guess that makes you the first, Skinny. And after that, I’m gonna kill the rest of you one by one.”

Calhoon pointed his gun at Skinny and pulled back the hammer. All of a sudden, Pete jumped forward and kicked Calhoon’s wrist with all his might but he couldn’t dislodge the gun. At the same time, Skinny ducked. The shot went off and went into the wall again.

“Get him!” Pete yelled and threw himself on Calhoon, but the huge man defended himself with a well-aimed blow that sent Pete to the dusty ground and almost robbed him of consciousness.

Calhoon laughed. "Brave but useless, boy. I can certainly handle all four of you!" He pointed his gun at Pete.

"Freeze! Police!" a voice suddenly roared through the night. "Drop your weapons!"

"Inspector Cotta!" cried Jupiter.

Cotta slowly stepped out of the darkness and approached Calhoon with his gun drawn. "I said drop your weapon! Drop it now!"

For a terrible moment, Calhoon did not move from the spot. Burning hatred lay on his face. He was still aiming at the Second Investigator.

"Wait... if you kill me..." Pete stammered, "you have a real problem... You'd better think about it."

Calhoon was frozen. Silence fell upon him. The seconds passed slowly and endlessly. Finally he said so quietly that only The Three Investigators could hear him: "You will pay for this. When I'm free, you'll be the first to pay."

Then he lowered his gun and dropped it on the ground. Cotta was immediately with him and handcuffed him.

"There's someone else," Bob said quickly, pointing to the wrecked Lincoln. "A woman... in the passenger seat. She is also armed."

"My colleagues are already with her," Cotta assured them, looking from one to the other. Slowly he shook his head. "I'd say that for a change it was not only in the last minute but at the very last second."

"Thank you, Inspector."

Before Cotta could answer, Skinny suddenly jumped onto the bonnet of Pete's MG. From there he stepped onto the car roof, and over the wall. Then he was gone.

"What..." Cotta started and wanted to go after him, but Jupiter held him back with a gesture.

"Let him go, Inspector. I'll explain later."

A short while later, an ambulance came and took Calhoon and Zia to the hospital under police guard. Cotta had contacted his colleagues to collect Wagner, Beaumont and Mike at the salvage yard.

And another team was getting a search warrant for Calhoon's property based on Bob and Pete's report on the counterfeiting equipment. Besides that, Jupiter told the inspector about the case in detail. Only the thing he kept quiet about was Skinny and the money bag. He didn't know how to tell Cotta that Skinny had disappeared with the money—with Jupiter's help, of course.

"But this time you were on pretty thin ice," said the inspector reproachfully when Jupiter finished. "That could easily have gone wrong."

"I know," Jupiter confessed. "I was very reckless. I thought we could crack this case wide open... but I guess I was wrong."

"Don't get me wrong, Jupe," growled Pete. "I don't blame you... but if you get involved with Skinny Norris, then it's obvious that there will be problems... Huge problems."

"Speaking of Skinny," Cotta said. "Why did he disappear over the wall? He had nothing to fear from us, if I understood correctly. Is that correct?"

Jupiter swallowed. It was the moment of truth. Bob and Pete looked at him in silence. But it was clear that he alone was responsible for it. "Well, the thing is, Inspector Cotta, Skinny has—"

"Are you talking about me?"

The Three Investigators and Inspector Cotta turned around in surprise to the voice. Skinny came confidently grinning and cool as a movie star strolled towards the group. In his hand was the blue plastic bag.

“Skinny!” cried Bob in surprise.

“Good evening, everyone. Inspector—I’m sorry I left so quickly earlier. But I wanted to avoid an unauthorized person finding the money. So I looked for it on the other side of the wall. And got this... Here it is.”

Skinny handed the bag to the inspector—and pulled it away at the last moment.

“I assume that I am entitled to the usual finder’s fee of ten percent for this? That would be twenty thousand dollars. Shall I take it out?”

“Take it easy,” Inspector Cotta replied angrily and wanted to reach for the bag again. Skinny pulled it away a second time.

“To be exact, a group of shady characters on the other side of the wall was already looking at the bag. I’m sure they wouldn’t have taken it to the police. At the risk of my life, I defended the find. I think I deserve a reward for that. And don’t forget that I could have disappeared with it. But I am an honest citizen. I know my duties. Of course, I’ll turn the money over to the police.”

“All right, all right!” growled Cotta. “You’ll get your reward! I can’t promise you ten percent, but—we’ll see.”

Skinny nodded happily and handed the bag to the inspector. Then he looked at The Three Investigators and continued: “As you may know, these three characters here do not attach importance to financial reward for their service to humanity. Perhaps it would therefore be possible to transfer their reward to me as well... Without me, the legendary ‘Three Investigators’ would have looked pretty washed-up this time.”

“Come on now, Skinny!” Pete hissed and angrily took a step towards him.

But Jupiter laughed, amused. “Why are you so upset, Pete? I’m giving Skinny the reward.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll be leaving Rocky Beach, won’t you, Skinny?” Jupiter asked.

“Indeed. The further away from you three, the better.”

“Then we are in agreement,” Jupiter quipped, “because if you ask me, there can be no greater reward for The Three Investigators than a Rocky Beach without Skinny Norris.”

“You got that right, Juve,” Pete agreed. “This is probably the first time we agree with Skinny.”

“And the last time,” Skinny added with grim satisfaction. “Count on it!”